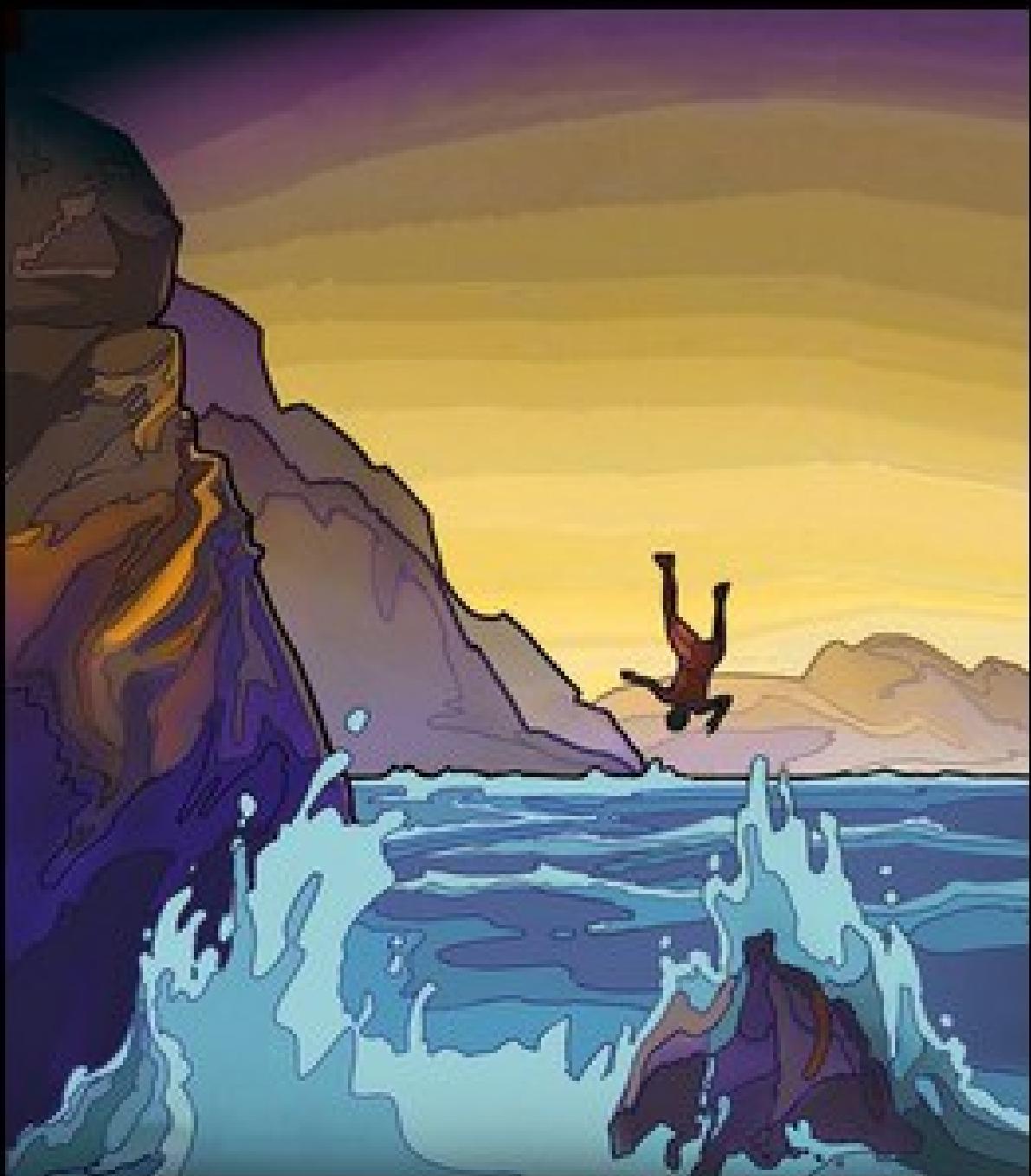


THE  
*INVESTIGATORS*  
in

THE MYSTERY OF THE  
CLIFF FALL



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CLIFF FALL

A man falls from a great height over a cliff into the raging sea. There is no sign of the body after that. The only witness to the incident is Pete, and he is detained by the police on suspicion of foul play. During interrogation, he is questioned down to the smallest detail. Right away, Jupiter and Bob take on the task to prove their friend's innocence. However, investigations into the man's past reveal very little. Despite being very thorough and methodical, The Three Investigators find this case difficult to tackle.

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Mystery of the Cliff Fall

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*(The Three ??? and the Devil's Cliff)*

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## 1. An Incidental Witness

The man fell. Pete Crenshaw bent over the window sill just in time to witness the fall as if in slow motion.

The body twisted slightly in the air as it plunged towards the raging sea. The red jacket fluttered in the wind and in the next moment, the baseball cap flew off the head. Water shot up the jagged rocks and thunderously dashed back as the body hit the water. The strong wave then grabbed the body and dragged it underneath.

The waves continued to splash and foam. Breathing heavily, Pete leaned out of the window as far as he could, but all he saw was the raging water. The man could no longer be seen.

Suddenly the cap washed up. It danced as a red spot on the white foam like a sign of hope, but no matter how long Pete stared into the crests of the waves, they did not release the man.

Pete's gaze wandered out to the sea. Perhaps the current had pulled the man away and he had reappeared further out... but there was nothing between the rocks except for water sprays and foam. Beyond that on the Pacific, only new wave crests rolled in tirelessly.

The viewing platform! This was the red-painted cantilever deck that jutted out from the house overhanging the cliff and looked like an observation deck for tourists. The man fell from there. Surely Pete could get a better view from there than from the window!

Pete rushed through the door out to the platform, ran to the railing and bent over it. His hope quickly faded. Although he now had a clearer view of the small rocky cove below him, there was nothing apart from a collection of driftwood on the whitecaps.

When the Second Investigator saw how powerfully the waves were swirling the wood against the cliffs, he realized that even if the man had survived the fall into the sea, he wouldn't be able to escape this chaos of waves, rocks, whirlpools and currents in one piece.

A guilty feeling shot up in Pete. Why had the man fallen over the railing at the very moment Pete had stepped into the living room? Did Pete frighten him? Was he trying to escape by climbing over the railing?

... And where had that girl gone? That was the surfer girl he had come here with.

Pete ran back into the house, crossed the living room and the hallway to get to the main door. He yanked it open.

There was nobody there. Where was she?

Then he shouted: "Xenia! Help! Something terrible has happened!"

There was no answer.

"Xenia!"

Again there was no response.

Pete turned around, ran back into the house, threw the door shut behind him. Then he returned to the living room and stood there, bewildered.

He realized that he should be calling the police to get help. Should he do it now? He seemed to be here all alone, so there was no other witness.

The Second Investigator took a deep breath in and out to calm himself. He looked around the remarkable living room where from every point, one could see the sea like in a wide-

screen cinema.

The man who lived here—or had lived here—was called Paul. That was as much as all Pete knew about him.

Xenia had said: “I have to drop by Paul’s place for a while. I’m supposed to help him hang a picture. It won’t take long. Maybe you can lend a hand too.”

“Sure,” Pete had said, “no problem.” And now this—a dead Paul and no Xenia. That was a huge problem.

Pete saw the image clearly in his mind, although he tried to repress what had happened afterwards. No, it wasn’t him trying, but something in him just did—something he could not control.

After Paul had let Pete in, he had said: ‘You must be Pete’ and ‘Wait here, please’. Then with the words ‘I have to do something inside’, he had gone back into the living room as quickly as if he were on the run.

Pete had waited in the hallway. A moment later, he had heard the loud cries: ‘Help me! Come quickly, I’m being threatened! Help!’ Pete, of course, had pushed open the door, rushed into the living room, where what had happened happened in seconds.

Paul had been at the railing of the viewing platform when he was talking on a mobile phone. The next moment he had fallen over the railing. A thought flashed through Pete’s mind. Had he actually been alone in the living room? Or was there another person he hadn’t seen?

Pete walked back to the window and stared at the waves. Perhaps Paul had resurfaced after all, and was floating somewhere in the water. However, Pete realized that it was wishful thinking.

“Please,” murmured the Second Investigator, while his eyes darting from side to side. “Please!” ... but deep down, he knew. There was no way for anybody to survive the fall.

Suddenly there was a sound. Pete flinched. He didn’t know how long he had been standing there staring at the sea. What was that sound? It was the door bell.

Between the ringing, someone knocked on the door. It was so demanding that it could be heard clearly despite the sound of the sea.

Could that be Xenia? The knocks were violent blows. Did she have that much strength? Someone then called out. It was a male voice. Who was that? Perhaps a neighbour?

“Mr Forster, please open up! It’s the police! Mr Forster!”

So Paul’s surname was Forster, Pete thought. At the same moment, he remembered that he already knew that. The name plate on the door read ‘P. Forster’.

Now the police were here, but it wasn’t Pete who called them. Forster was dead... and he, Pete, was the only witness to the incident... maybe even the trigger!

“It was me,” Pete muttered. “Why was he so frightened of me? Is it my fault? I didn’t mean to do anything...”

Would the police believe him? A boy, a stranger, here in the house... Wasn’t it obvious to think that Pete had... pushed the man? Nonsense, thought the Second Investigator. His mind was already going crazy... but in any case, he should always stick to the truth.

Again there were knocks and shouts. Indecisively, Pete walked out of the living room into the hallway towards the main door. In front of the door, he paused, not knowing what to do. If he did not open the door, the police might just bash through it... Wait a minute! Did he lock the door? He couldn’t remember as he was in a confused state.

“Mr Forster! Police!” it roared from outside.

Should he hide? No. The truth had to be told.

Finally, Pete opened the door and stared into the muzzle of a gun.

“Don’t move!” the policeman yelled. “Hands behind your head and don’t move!”

Pete suppressed the reaction of pulling out his business card. Presumably, the card would make little impression on the police. Above all, the movement could possibly be misinterpreted as the drawing of a weapon.

“Slowly step back and don’t try anything funny.”

The Second Investigator did as ordered.

Carefully and keeping Pete in sight, the first policeman slipped into the hallway to let his colleague—a policewoman—in.

“Where is Mr Forster?” the policewoman asked sharply. “What happened here?”

“The man fell into the sea,” Pete said quietly, “and is probably... dead.”

The officers nodded meaningfully to each other. “You keep him here while I search the premises,” the policeman said to his colleague.

Pete did not dare to move.

A short while later, the policeman came back. “There’s nobody else here. Okay, what happened?”

“I... I don’t know,” Pete stammered. “I was here in the hallway and I heard the man shout for help. I went in and saw him falling over the railing and down the cliff.”

“Did you push him?”

“What?” Pete replied. “Of course not!”

“—But there is no one else here,” the policeman said.

Pete remained silent.

“Okay,” the policeman said. “We’re taking you in for further questioning.”

## 2. A Surprising Call

The two other members of The Three Investigators, Jupiter Jones and Bob Andrews, were gathered in their headquarters. This was an old mobile home trailer located at The Jones Salvage Yard, a business that was owned and operated by Jupiter's uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda. The external of the trailer was covered with scrap metal and other junk to hide it from prying eyes. Access into it was only by secret entrances.

Inside, the three boys had furnished their office over time with assembled and repaired items obtained from the salvage yard. They also kept all sorts of equipment—such as electronic gadgets, computers and communication systems—that were useful for their investigation work. Along the wall, there were shelves and cabinets containing records of all their cases solved so far.

Bored, Jupiter unscrewed the cover off a gold-plated pen he had received as first prize in a school competition. He carefully examined the individual parts as if he had never seen such a writing instrument before. The casing bore his name 'Jupiter Jones', neatly engraved right next to the quotation '*Ne discere cessa*'.

"I know it's Latin, but what does it actually mean?" asked Bob, who was sitting on the arm of the chair right next to his friend.

"'Never stop learning,'" Jupe replied. "It's a quotation I think is worth heeding." He put the pen cover back.

"How many prizes have you won so far?" Bob asked and slumped down on the chair. Jupiter thought about it for a moment. "I've lost count," he claimed.

"The school must have ordered boxes of such engraved pens all with your name on it," Bob muttered, "and the teachers must be getting bored with this."

"You could be right," Jupe replied. "For a while now, I've had the feeling that the second prize is more valuable than the first. This time it was free tickets to a football game."

"So why didn't you come second?" asked Bob. "Manipulating that should be easy for you!"

"I'm not interested in football, as you already know," Jupiter said. "Besides, I always want to be first."

Bob smiled to himself. "With your talent, I wonder what will become of you."

Jupiter looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm sure your uncle would like you to take over the salvage yard one day."

"I hope not... and I also won't commit myself to anything like that."

"As it is, junk is waiting for you just outside here!" Bob said with a grin.

Jupiter looked up and said seriously: "Well, it won't be that bad. I'm sure you'll open a book store one day, and—"

"—And live off the meagre earnings of a book store?" added Bob. "I don't know."

"At least you're happy around books!"

"I'm happy now too. We are friends—you, Pete and I. We solve mysterious cases, the sun is shining and school doesn't bother us too much. All in all, it's a carefree life. Should we really move on? I don't know."

Jupiter took a breath. "Anyway, we have to stay friends, no matter what!"

“Speaking of which, I wonder why Pete isn’t here yet,” Bob said. “Maybe we should have gone with him after all.”

“—To watch him surf at the beach?” asked Jupiter. “Probably Kelly went with him and he’s running late.”

“I’ll call him,” Bob decided. He took his mobile phone and tapped on Pete’s number.

The ringing went on for quite a while. Suddenly a strange voice sounded: “Yes?”

“Uh... who... uh... I’d like to speak to Pete. I haven’t dialled the wrong number, have I?”

“No. Who are you?”

“Bob... Bob Andrews,” Bob stammered in surprise.

“I’m sorry. You can’t talk to Pete. He is with the police.”

Bob swallowed. “Did something happen to him?” he asked tonelessly.

“We had to take Pete Crenshaw into custody. By the way, who are you? His friend?”

Instead of an answer, Bob broke the connection in shock. With wide eyes, he stared at Jupe. “The police have arrested Pete!”

“Excuse me?”

The mobile phone rang. It rang again and again, but Bob did not answer it.

“Here! Give it to me,” Jupiter said and took the phone from his friend’s hand. “Yes?”

“Officer James here. I don’t like it when someone hangs up in the middle of a conversation!”

“Excuse me, sir,” Jupiter said calmly, “I must have hit the wrong key. You’ve arrested Pete? What is he accused of?”

“I don’t think I have to give you any information,” the policeman said, “and wasn’t there another person on the phone just now?”

“Yes, there are two of us,” Jupiter replied.

“Give me your name and address, and I’ll get back to you.”

“Well...” The First Investigator hesitated.

“Come on, or it will be uncomfortable for you!”

“Yes... sir.” Jupiter provided the requested information and gave the address of the salvage yard.

“I’ll call you back if necessary.”

“Wait! Can you tell me—”

“Goodbye.”

“What?” Jupiter put the phone aside. There was a worried look on his face.

Bob didn’t look any more relaxed. “Pete must be in some bad situation. If only we knew what it was! I hope the police will call back soon.”

“The police!” Jupe slapped his furrowed brow. “Aunt Mathilda must not find out about this under any circumstances! Only yesterday I had to promise her that we would not engage in any dangerous activities.”

“You promised her that?”

“Of course not... but that’s how she interpreted it. I said: ‘Yes, I promise you that we will anticipate periclitation a little better. That will then lead to everyone’s satisfaction, including yours, dear Aunt Mathilda, knowing how much you care for us and especially for yours truly!’”

“Your aunt was satisfied with that kind of gibberish? I certainly didn’t understand it.”

“Well, she said something like: ‘I think it might have been better had you said that in Japanese.’ By the way, ‘periclitation’ means ‘the state of being in peril’.”

“Sheesh!” Bob hissed. “Now, can we get back to the matter on hand—that Pete is currently in a state of peril?”

“I think we have to call Inspector Cotta,” Jupiter decided. “Maybe he can help us.” Bob nodded.

Inspector Cotta was The Three Investigators’ main contact person at the Rocky Beach Police Department. The inspector had helped them whenever he could albeit reluctantly at times. Conversely, with the help of the three boys, Cotta had also been able to solve many criminal activities.

Jupiter dialled the number of the Rocky Beach Police Department. However, the inspector was not there, but would be expected back shortly. Jupiter asked for an immediate call back.

“Now what?” asked Bob.

Together they went over the facts. As far as they knew, Pete had gone surfing at a beach at Oxnard as he had done so often lately. Initially, he went there with friends, but as he liked the beach so much, he subsequently went there alone.

“Something must have happened,” said the First Investigator. “Perhaps it happened so quickly that Pete couldn’t get back to us.”

Bob just nodded silently.

“I hate sitting around like this!” Jupiter picked up the phone and called the police department again. “This is Jupiter Jones. Is... No, I know... he’s not there yet... Yes, please tell him to call me back. It’s urgent!”

Furious, Jupiter hung up. “There are only unfriendly people at the station now,” he said.

“Perhaps we can check the Internet to see if there is any news from the Oxnard area,” Bob suggested.

“Good idea!” Enthusiastically, Jupe switched on the computer.

For a while, the two investigators had to deal with reports of damaged cars, house break-ins and fights. In any case, none of the reports provided clues to what Pete was arrested for.

As they were engrossed in a report about car jacking, they suddenly heard Aunt Mathilda calling: “Jupe! Hey, Jupe! Where are you?”

“She calls me now of all times!” Jupiter muttered. “I hope it’s not anything to do with the police.”

Annoyed, the First Investigator stood up and reached for the ‘See-All’ periscope that was constructed from stove pipes fitted with mirrors. This allowed him to scan the salvage yard unnoticed.

“There’s a black van outside,” Jupiter reported. “I don’t think it is the police. In any case, we have to be cautious.”

“Juupeeterrr!” his aunt called out again.

“We had better go out and see what she wants,” Jupiter decided.

### 3. Two Sinister Men

Jupiter and Bob left Headquarters via the underground passage known as Tunnel Two and that led them to their outdoor workshop.

At the fence, Bob triggered a hidden mechanism that swung up a couple of boards to reveal an opening they called Green Gate One. This allowed them to sneak out to the street. They intended get out of the salvage yard and walk back in through the main gate to give the impression that they were just coming back from somewhere.

As they entered the main gate, there was the black van with the side windows down. A tall, slender man sat behind the wheel. Meanwhile, a second man, who wore a dark leather jacket, was talking to Aunt Mathilda. This man was much shorter and stockier, had a balding forehead and a long braid down his back.

It certainly wasn't the police. At first glance, Jupiter could tell that his aunt was uncomfortable. Again and again, she looked around for help. When she spotted her nephew, her features relaxed a little.

Determined, Jupiter stepped in while Bob kept an eye on the van.

“How can I help you?” the First Investigator forced his way into the conversation.

The stocky man turned his attention to Jupiter. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes. Beneath them was a round face. On his neck was a large tiger tattoo.

“You Jupiter Jones?” he asked the First Investigator.

“Yeah!” Jupiter replied. “How can I be of service to you?”

“Huh?” The man left his mouth open for a moment. “Talk normally, fat boy!”

Jupiter swallowed the provocative allusion to his weight. After all, the man was not any thinner than him. Rather, the opposite was the case.

Before Jupe could reply, the man then pointed at Bob with an angled hand as if he were a disgusting creature. “And who is that?”

“Who he is is not relevant here,” Jupiter said.

With Jupiter at her side, Aunt Mathilda found new courage. “Leave the boy alone!” she snapped at the man. “Either you take a look at what you can buy here or leave. For a little money, you can find a lot of stuff here that can make everyday life easier or at least more beautiful. Unfortunately, our business does not include information about people. I hope you understood me!” She glanced at her nephew and added more quietly: “He wanted to know something about you, Jupe.”

The man behind the wheel of the van sensed that something was going wrong. He opened the driver's door and got out with awkward movements. Regardless of his stature, he seemed to be the opposite of his companion—dressed in dark elegant clothes, even if the trousers were a little worn, underlining the man's lived-in impression. He wore a fashionable black beret and also sunglasses that blocked the view of his eyes. He had a narrow upper lip moustache over thin, finely drawn lips.

In a soft voice, he said with a distinctive French accent: “*Chère Madame*, please excuse the rude behaviour of my... *compagnon*.” With a casual movement, he pulled off his glasses so Mrs Jones could look at him better. “Sometimes my companion finds it difficult to distinguish between ordinary people and a true lady! *Naturellement*, we would like to look

around here and perhaps acquire something. It would be a great honour if you would show me around a little, *Madame!*”

Jupe could not believe his ears. Unfortunately, he knew that his aunt had a weakness for such a slimy trick.

Indeed, a brief smile had flitted across Mathilda Jones’s face during the man’s flamboyant approach. “Sure,” she purred, “I’d be very happy to show you our treasures. What exactly are you interested in?”

“‘Treasure’ is the right word,” the man fluted. “We are collectors of treasures, so to speak. *Collectionneurs de trésors...* My name is Esprit de Cartuche—French descent, court nobility. You understand?”

“Uh... yes,” breathed Aunt Mathilda.

Jupiter’s jaw dropped. What kind of hogwash was that? And then that name! Surely this was showmanship of the very lowest order. At the same time, the First Investigator noticed a bulge in the man’s jacket. Did he have a gun?

The stocky companion was probably already used to his partner’s speeches. Without making a face, he stepped aside and strolled with moderate interest through the items that the salvage yard had on special offer.

Bob nodded to Jupiter and kept an eye on the man.

In the meantime, Esprit de Cartuche had Aunt Mathilda escort him to the covered section of the salvage yard with the words: “You and me, we make a wonderful pair of explorers, *mais oui!*”

Jupiter followed them at a distance.

Shortly afterwards, Esprit picked up a curved floor lamp and tilted it a little to look at it up close. “Perfect art nouveau, dear lady, *très impressionnant!*”

“So it is,” Aunt Mathilda agreed, “but it’s an imitation, of course. I’m sure you recognized that right away!”

“*Naturellement*,” said Esprit, “but we will both keep quiet about it, won’t we?” He laughed.

Aunt Mathilda laughed too.

Jupiter’s stomach almost turned. This was a set-up! First the tattooed guy put on the pressure, then Monsieur Charmant came and smoothed things over.

The supposed Frenchman put the lamp down. “These are nice boys you have here—*des jeunes hommes sympathiques*,” he said casually. “Your sons?”

“Oh, no!” Aunt Mathilda made a throwing away hand gesture. “Although I wouldn’t mind... They are my nephew Jupiter and his friend Bob.”

“They... they help you a lot here?”

“Well...” Aunt Mathilda began, “when they are not doing something else.”

Alarm bells rang for Jupiter. Hopefully his aunt would not reveal too much about them! However, he did not want to interrupt the conversation yet as he wanted to know what these men were really here for.

“*Bien sur!* Boys like them would surely have many hobbies or activities. Perhaps they go to the beach frequently?”

“To the beach? Uh... not so much Jupe, but Pete...” Aunt Mathilda replied.

“Pete?” he said. “Can you tell me more about him, *s'il vous plaît?*”

“Why do you want to know about Pete?” Now Aunt Mathilda’s expression hardened. She became suspicious as Esprit had gone a little over the top. She stepped between two wine barrels on which some decorative pieces were waiting for buyers.

Esprit had spotted a vase and took it in his hands. “I like the beach as well, especially the one at Oxnard.” The man then stepped close to her such that she could not move away from the barrels.

“Mister! Please don’t block my way!” Mathilda squirmed.

Jupiter tensed his muscles.

The man paused for a second, then took a step back, laughing. “*Mais oui, madame, excusez-moi!* This vase—it distracted me. I know someone who appreciates such a thing. How much is it?”

“Twenty dollars,” said Aunt Mathilda in a firm voice.

He smiled. “I’ll give you twenty-five... because you are so unique, *Madame*,” the strange visitor said and turned around. Now he was standing facing Jupiter. His eyes seemed to fix on the First Investigator and Jupiter felt as if he were being X-rayed. Then the man pulled out his wallet and handed the money to Aunt Mathilda.

“*Alors*,” he said as he took the vase. “You don’t need to wrap it.”

He strode past Jupiter, nodded to his companion, who instantly let go of the kitschy sea eagle figurine he was holding and got back into the van.

With a slightly casual “*Au revoir*,” Esprit de Cartuche swung behind the wheel and started the van. As he headed for the exit after a generous turn, he raised his hand in salute.

Seconds later, all that remained of the visit was a cloud of dust that swirled around for quite a while in the light breeze that blew in from the sea.

## 4. The Interrogation

The holding cell at the Oxnard Police Department was soberly furnished. Fluorescent light flickered from the ceiling although it was still daytime outside.

There were three persons in the cell—a vagrant staring at Pete as if considering whether it was worth begging him, a drunken man with a beard who snored loudly, and Pete himself.

Just then, a policeman approached the cell, opened the door, and led the Second Investigator out.

“Officer James,” the man introduced himself. “We’re going to question you now.”

Apparently it was now getting serious. Pete was led into a room that reminded him of the interrogation rooms he knew from TV programmes. There were a table, three chairs, a filing cabinet, a lamp and a mirrored glass window through which one could probably see in from the other side.

The policeman assigned Pete a chair and then left him alone. Pete waited. He was probably being watched. Although thoughts raged inside him, he acted in a nonchalant manner—at least he tried.

The chair was not comfortable. The Second Investigator leaned forward, propped his elbows on the table, rested his chin on his hands and stared blankly at the opposite bare wall. He was a suspect in a crime. In a way, he could understand it, but he was innocent. Hopefully this would be cleared up quickly.

Nothing happened for a while. Every now and then, Pete changed his sitting position. Then he stood up and started pacing back and forth in the room.

Finally, the door was opened and a woman entered.

“My name is Ella,” the woman said, looking Pete coolly in the eye until he avoided her gaze. “I’m a detective with the Oxnard Police Department.”

With the cold, suspicious look on Detective Ella’s face, Pete lost heart. She was young and looked very ambitious. Under other circumstances, he might have liked her with her brown hair tied in a braid and her many freckles. Officer James was clearly older, seemed calmer at first glance, but that could all be deceptive.

“Please sit down!” Detective Ella told Pete.

Pete took his seat with an air of calm. Then Officer James entered, holding a small clear plastic bag containing Pete’s mobile phone.

The woman sat down opposite Pete. Now she suddenly smiled. “Officer James is here as well.” Her voice now sounded softer than expected. “We’d like to hear from you, Pete Crenshaw, about what happened at Paul Forster’s house on Devil’s Cliff.”

“I’d like to know that too,” Pete said.

The detective did not respond. “If you tell us everything, you won’t have to stay here for long. There are nicer places to be at than an interrogation room.”

Pete was silent.

“Just tell me what happened. How you got into that house and why you pushed that man down.”

That came completely out of the blue. Pete sat up. “I didn’t push him down!”

“No? How did you know Mr Forster?” Detective Ella said with a sharp voice.

Pete shook his head.

“Please? I didn’t hear you!”

“I didn’t know the man,” Pete said.

“Then why were you in his house?”

“I was supposed to help him hang up a picture,” said the Second Investigator. He read in the police officers’ faces that they didn’t believe him. After all, it sounded absurd.

“So you go to a man you don’t even know to help him hang up a picture,” the detective stated, as if it was the most normal thing that people did. “Then, as a result, the man falls down the cliff.” She smiled. “Was the picture hung crooked?”

“I don’t know how it all happened!” cried Pete. “I only went there because a girl asked me to!”

“What girl?” the detective asked sweetly.

“She was an acquaintance of Forster,” Pete replied. “I went to the house with her, but she remained outside somewhere.”

“There was no girl on the scene,” Detective Ella said uncomfortably calmly.

“That’s right,” Officer James confirmed. He turned the bag with the phone in his hands, looked at it and then he left the room.

Now Pete was alone with the detective. He took a breath. “Perhaps she had left for some reason.”

“How did you actually get to the house?” asked Detective Ella.

“With my car. I drove from the beach at Oxnard to Devil’s Cliff.”

“Okay, let’s talk about the girl.” The detective looked him in the eye. “Describe her.”

“Uh...” Pete went on.

“Come on, you’ve been with her longer than that. What is her name?”

“Xenia,” Pete said.

“What did she look like?”

Pete felt the pressure that Ella was putting on him. Looking for help, he thought about how Jupiter would handle the situation. He would answer calmly and crystal clear.

“About my height,” Pete said, “maybe a little shorter... long, reddish-blonde hair, two braided pigtails... a narrow and strikingly cheerful face.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“She looked lively, calm, open, and cheerful.”

“Clothes?”

“Blue T-shirt, short white trousers, brown sandals,” Pete said calmly.

“Last name?”

“She didn’t tell me that.”

“Of course,” said Detective Ella. “Didn’t she have a car herself?”

“Yes. Chevrolet Spark, older model—white... or grey.”

“Licence plate number?”

“I don’t know! I only saw it briefly. Why would I have remembered it?”

“White or grey? Which is it?”

“Light grey,” said Pete, “I think it was light grey.”

“And why didn’t she go in her own car? Did you force her to come along?”

Pete looked at the detective. “What nonsense! Of course I didn’t force her! In fact, she asked me for a lift as her car wouldn’t start.”

“And you believed her?” she asked.

“I tried it myself,” Pete said.

Detective Ella laughed. “Aha... Pete Crenshaw, the car mechanic.”

Pete gasped. "Then just go and see if her car is still there!"

"What was the girl's name?" asked Ella.

"Xenia. I've already told you."

"Xenia—so it is... What more do you know about her?"

"I don't know!"

"—But you spoke to her."

"No, she spoke to me first—on the beach and then again in the car park when she was trying to start her car. I actually wanted to stop by Kelly's place and—"

"Kelly?"

"Yes, my friend."

"And instead of Kelly, then Xenia."

"What do you mean?"

"Xenia, Kelly... I can't wait to see what else you come up with. So this Xenia approached you and you just fetched her to wherever she wanted to go?"

"Look! I told you her car wouldn't start! She wanted to go to Rocky Beach, but on the way, she had to drop by that man's house at Devil's Cliff."

"So she lives in Rocky Beach... like you? What a coincidence!"

"No, in Santa Monica. Someone would have picked her up in Rocky Beach... or she would have gone home by bus, I don't know. Maybe I shouldn't have given her the lift in the first place... Oh, why is it so difficult to—"

"—You trusted her just like that?"

"She's a surfer and about my age. She's a nice girl I spoke to and wanted to help, why should I—"

"Whoops! You spoke to her? I thought you didn't know her?"

"We're just chatting on the beach," Pete explained in an annoyed tone. "We do that among beach-goers, and we do not need to know each other to engage in casual talk—a few words, nothing important... something like: 'The waves are coming in, let's go catch them'... 'How do you like this beach? Have you been here before?' and stuff like that."

Very annoyed, Pete looked up at the ceiling. His calmness, which he had painstakingly forced upon himself, was gone. Detective Ella had managed to stir him up.

"—And stuff like that," she repeated. "Mr Forster's house is very isolated. How could this Xenia go off on her own?"

"How would I know? Maybe she walked!" Pete almost yelled. "Maybe you could ask the two police officers who went there."

"Thanks for the tip, Pete, I've already done that." The detective then looked at him silently for a while. Apparently she decided to shift down a gear. "We got to the scene very quickly," she explained, "and the road has few turns. If she left on foot that way, my colleagues would have seen her."

Just then, the door opened—finally! Officer James came back with Pete's mobile phone in his hand.

Detective Ella gave James a questioning look, then her gaze shot back to Pete. She started abruptly: "Now let's stop playing games! What happened inside the house?"

Pete slumped back in the chair. "I... I... I don't know," he stuttered, but then this attack suddenly awakened his fighting spirit. "How long can you actually keep me here?" he asked back.

"Six hours," Officer James said calmly.

"If murder is suspected, longer," added Detective Ella, grinning broadly at Pete.



## 5. Pete Gets a Reprieve

“Listen here, Pete Crenshaw—it’s our job to find out everything,” said Detective Ella, “just not what happened in Forster’s house, unfortunately. So, tell us the whole story again, but we’ll do it another way this time—the other way round. You tell it backwards—from the moment my colleagues arrested you and you said Forster was dead. That’s what you said, isn’t it?”

Pete nodded.

“So begin...”

“Look!” Pete squirmed. “Surely I wouldn’t have told you that this Mr Forster fell into the sea if I had pushed him myself.”

“Why not? You might have been stressed. You were under pressure. You seem a bit sensitive, and you can’t always control everything.”

“Maybe you didn’t mean to kill him,” Officer James interjected. “You were arguing and you just wanted to push him lightly.”

“No, it wasn’t like that!”

“—But you said you heard Forster shout for help...”

“Yes,” Pete said, “so?”

“We received a call from Mr Forster asking for help, claiming that he was threatened,” the detective stated. “Were you the one threatening him?”

“No,” Pete replied. “I was just waiting in the hallway. He shouted, I went in and saw him falling over the railing.”

“Did you see anyone else there?” the detective asked.

“I did not see anyone else,” Pete replied, “but does it mean that there was really no one there? Perhaps the person who pushed him escaped... or he fell over the railing himself?”

“Did you blackmail Forster? Did you want money?” Detective Ella continued probing.

“No!”

“There were no signs of forced entry, so I guess he let you in. You knew him, didn’t you?”

“No! I—”

“—Or you’ve been there before,” Detective Ella interrupted.

“No, no, and no! What makes you think of that? You can call Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department. He will confirm that I would never hurt anyone!”

There was a knock and the door opened a gap. Officer James was called out.

Detective Ella also stood up. “Break!” she announced. “Listen carefully—we have proof that you are lying. It would be better for you to tell the truth. Think it over. You still have a choice.”

Twenty long minutes followed, during which Pete desperately tried to sort out his thoughts in the inhospitable room. What had he got himself into? He could not explain it himself. In any case, he was suspected of murder.

Pete recalled the situation in Forster’s house. Could he rely on his memory? Had he really not pushed the man? No, he hadn’t, of course—or was his memory playing tricks on him?

Detective Ella had talked about evidence. Were there cameras there? He was at the window when the man fell. The image of the memory blurred. Maybe he was just telling himself that because his memory didn't want to believe the truth.

Finally, the door opened again and Detective Ella entered. Now, she seemed friendly and relaxed. "So, do you want to clear your conscience?"

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, get it all off your chest. Believe me, it's very easy when you start."

"Have you spoken to Inspector Cotta?"

"Officer James is still trying to reach him. In the meantime, we'll continue..."

Pete was silent.

Ella's expression became serious again. "Good, you don't want it any other way. Then the story backwards, as I suggested... My colleagues arrested you and you stated that Mr Forster was dead. What happened before that?"

Again the door opened. It was Officer James. Pete noticed a frown as the policeman's gaze fell on Detective Ella.

"Let him go, Suzanne!"

Had he just heard that right? Pete almost choked with joy.

The detective looked at her colleague. "Excuse me?"

"We can let him go. I was on the phone with his father and he'll be here to pick him up."

"Pick him up? And why so sudden? Fred! The boy's a murder suspect!"

Officer James stepped fully into the room and closed the door. "I have spoken to Inspector Cotta."

The burden that fell from Pete could hardly have been greater. When it mattered most, The Three Investigators could simply rely on Inspector Cotta.

"Who is this Cotta anyway?" the detective asked.

"The inspector from Rocky Beach. He confirmed that Pete would never do anything like that, and that he actually runs a kind of junior investigation agency, together with two friends —Bob Andrews and a cheeky fat boy called Jupiter Jones."

"Exactly!" Pete exclaimed, pulling a business card of The Three Investigators out of his pocket and holding it out to the detective. It said:



Detective Ella barely glanced at the card. "What does that mean, Fred? You're really going to let him go? The kid's not telling us everything! On the call history of his phone, there is a call made to Forster! At least explain that to me, Pete, please."

"That's not true," cried the Second Investigator. "I never spoke to him on the phone!"

Reluctantly, the detective stood up. "One more thing."

"Yes?" said Pete.

Detective Ella's face came very close to his. "Even if you are allowed to leave now, I don't believe you! I still believe that you're playing cat and mouse with us here!"

After the formalities had been completed, Pete's father hurriedly pushed his son out of the police department. He had parked his car diagonally opposite the entrance in a visitors' car park, illuminated by the yellowish light of street lamps. Rarely had Pete been so pleased by the sight of his father's car.

In the meantime, it had long since become dark.

Mr Crenshaw remained silent, but Pete knew that a waterfall of questions would pour over him as soon as they sat inside the vehicle.

... But what came was almost worse. No sooner had his father started the vehicle than he said just two words: "Start explaining!" It sounded like an order.

"There's nothing to explain, Dad. I'm completely innocent... That's why they let me go."

"But why did they keep you there for hours? What is this about?"

"I don't know!" Pete didn't have the nerve to endure a second round of interrogation. Not now. Later he would tell his father everything. Of course he would, but right now he wanted nothing but his peace—peace to think about everything.

"The police said you can't leave Rocky Beach so they can question you further at any time."

"But that's normal, Dad! Can't we go home first? I'm completely exhausted."

Unfortunately, that was the wrong word.

"Exhausted? You think it's only you? On our new movie, all the animations were messed up and I'm supposed to be sitting in front of the computer in the studio instead of picking up my son from the police department in Oxnard!"

Pete's father was a special effects specialist who worked with major movie studios in Hollywood.

"Can you please not drive so fast?" Pete requested. "I'm sorry, Dad—about your work and having to come to Oxnard to get me."

"It's all right," said Mr Crenshaw. "This computer work is just extremely tiring—especially for the eyes. It used to be better when we had to construct everything physically. I could work for days then."

"Yes, before." Pete was glad they had changed the subject. "Are you working on the sequel to *Dangerous Birds*?"

"Exactly, and of course the stupid birds have to be even bigger, more dangerous and more sinister than in the first movie. You wouldn't believe what kind of work that is! And then the director always comes up with new ideas just at the moment when I feel I'm starting to see some progress!"

"Freddy Stewart?"

"Yes, that's him—the famous and multiple awarded director... but behind the scenes, he's a total jackass to work with!"

Pete had to laugh. He rarely saw his father in such a mood. "What kind of special effects are you working on right now?"

Pete's father cast a critical sideways glance at his son. "You're just trying to distract me from the subject, aren't you?" However, his voice sounded much more relaxed. "I'm just worried that you three are involved in another dangerous case."

"Oh, Dad," said Pete. "I understand that, but I can assure you that it has nothing to do with the three of us. Really, I stumbled into something completely different. I'll tell you everything, I really will, but right now I'm just overwhelmed."

Mr Crenshaw was silent, but steered the car more gently into the next bend in the highway.

No one spoke for a while. Then Pete's father said: "I'll drive you home first and you rest. It's a good thing Mum's in Florida for a few more days, otherwise she'd be very upset."

Suddenly the Second Investigator missed his friends. "Dad? If you have to go back to the studio right away, couldn't I—"

"—Go to the salvage yard? To meet Jupiter and Bob? You can forget that, son!"

"But—"

"No buts!" Pete's father accelerated.

"Not so fast, Dad!" said Pete. "Don't you think I could at least very briefly—"

"You said the incident had nothing to do with the three of you, Pete!"

"That's true, but—"

"—And anyway, you're not in the mood to talk today... right?"

That was a mean trick.

"Dad! We were supposed to meet up earlier, and—"

"Do you agree with me that there is a certain exceptional situation today?" Mr Crenshaw interjected. "After all, you are suspected of having pushed a man into the sea!"

"—But I didn't do it!"

"I believe you, Pete. I really do... but I think that's enough for today."

Pete gave up. "Okay. Home then."

## 6. More Interrogation for Pete

At least Pete was able to talk to his friends extensively on the phone that evening. So Jupiter and Bob already knew quite a lot when Pete arrived at Headquarters the next morning at seven o'clock sharp, as agreed.

Jupiter and Bob were already waiting for him. For breakfast, the First Investigator had got a pot of cocoa and a huge load of sandwiches from Aunt Mathilda.

"There you are at last," the First Investigator said impatiently as Pete entered the trailer.

Pete's gaze fell on the sandwiches. "Man, am I hungry! Last night I could hardly eat anything. I was totally nauseous."

"I can imagine," Bob said, holding the plate out to him, "after all you've been through. I was still checking on the Internet about the guy who fell into the sea. There is little to be found about Paul Forster, both professionally and personally. He seems to have avoided social media at all costs."

"That is understandable," Jupiter said, "if he doesn't want to reveal so much about himself."

"However, I did discover a business website," Bob continued. "From it, at least, it appears that he made his money from consulting on personal security, home security and that sort of thing—a business that is apparently very expensive and exclusive. I'm afraid that's all I can gather."

While chewing on a sandwich, Jupe turned to Pete and asked: "When you were at the beach yesterday, did you come across the two guys we described to you—the two who came here to the salvage yard?"

"The ones you told me about last night?" Pete shook his head. "I would have noticed that—in particular that Espace."

"Esprit," Jupiter corrected him. "He pretends to be a French nobleman, but I think it's all an act. 'Esprit de Cartuche' sounds more like a stage name."

"At least he convinced your Aunt Mathilda," Bob mentioned with a grin.

"Only at first," Jupiter said. "Oh yes, what I wanted to ask you, Bob—what was the tattooed guy doing while the esteemed Monsieur Cartuche was smooching Aunt Mathilda?"

Bob laughed. "Poor acting, I would say. He was rummaging around the discounted items, picking up this and that. I got the very distinct impression that he was doing nothing but checking out the surroundings. Then out of the blue he chatted me up and asked me if I was Bob Andrews."

"Which you confirmed?"

"I didn't confirm anything. I asked a counter-question—where did he get that name in the first place? Well, he simply said: 'None of your business!'"

"Excuse me?" asked Pete. "Was that how he expressed himself? That's not very well-mannered."

"Their visit can hardly be a coincidence," Jupiter added. "Esprit has been asking about you Pete, and he even mentioned the beach at Oxnard."

"Jupe, did you get the van's licence plate number?" asked Pete.

“Engraved in my brain, but I’m afraid it won’t help us. The way I see those two, the licence plate is fake or the trail leads to a rental car company.”

Pete stretched out. Today he particularly enjoyed being at Headquarters. It was like home.“Oh yeah, it just feels super good to be back with you guys and not in the clutches of Detective Ella.”

“You have Inspector Cotta to thank for your release,” Jupiter said. “We finally got him on the line yesterday. He already suspected why we wanted to talk to him because that Officer James had already contacted him earlier. Cotta put in a good word for you.”

“Actually, I was surprised that I was allowed to leave so suddenly,” Pete said. “Officer James and Cotta seem to get on well. They’ve probably known each other for a while. The inspector even mentioned to Officer James that you are a ‘cheeky fat boy’!” Pete had to laugh when he saw Jupiter’s pinched face.

“He didn’t, did he?” Jupe asked.

“Yes, otherwise how would Officer James have mentioned it,” said Pete. “Ha! It’s probably because you always know everything better.”

“Well, thank you, Pete,” grumbled Jupe. “Now let’s get back to the main issue on hand. Please shed more light on this strange incident on Devil’s Cliff. This has to be a case for us because you, Pete, is innocent but is under suspicion. It’s also a case that is mysterious in more ways than one, in particular when there is still a missing person...”

“What do you mean by ‘missing’?” asked Pete.

“Well, for one thing, you witness, as if by chance, a man falling into the water and supposedly died, but there is no body. My experience tells me that—”

“Wait a minute!” Pete interrupted him. “The police might have found the body by now. We don’t know that, and besides, you can believe me—no one could survive such a fall! He dropped at least twenty metres or so to not-too-deep water that was full of jagged rocks. The current would have pulled the body far out to sea such that it will never be found again. That’s the very obvious sequence of events.”

“Could be,” Jupiter said. “Still, questions arise in my mind, for example, why did this happen at the exact moment you were on the scene?”

“An unfortunate coincidence,” said Pete. “Perhaps I frightened him.”

“—And where did that girl disappear to?”

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “She might have her reasons. Tell me, Jupe, do you doubt my account?”

“Of course not, Pete... but it’s just too little that I know, so we have to go into a bit of detail today.”

Pete groaned. Not another interrogation! Although he was now sure that he had not pushed Forster, as Detective Ella had accused him of, he would have preferred to suppress everything. However, he realized that Jupiter wanted as much and as accurate information as possible. When the First Investigator sensed a case, there was no stopping his brain.

“Okay, Jupe, but first of all, what is more important to you—helping me or solving the mysterious accident?”

“Both, so let’s start with the exact order you described,” Jupiter replied with a smile. “First, the central scene—describe again all the details from the moment you pressed the door bell.”

Pete gave himself a jolt. “After a while, Forster opened the door...”

“How much time did he take after you rang?” interrupted Jupiter.

“After about a minute,” Pete said. “I was just about to ring the bell for the second time.”

“Not unusual, actually,” Jupiter complained. “The door bell rang, he came. It takes about that long if you’re engaged in something and you’re not too far from the main door. Go on.”

“He asked me to come in and I came into a kind of hallway with doors leading off.”

“How many doors?” asked Jupiter.

“I think three.”

“Open?” asked Jupiter.

“Only one—the one to the living room, but it was only a gap. I couldn’t see much more than a coffee table and a huge window. I couldn’t see the viewing platform... only later—”

Jupiter interrupted him. “We’ll get to that later. What impression did Mr Forster make on you?”

“Quite a normal one, actually. I wouldn’t exactly say relaxed, but not panicked either. I couldn’t see his eyes clearly, though, because he was wearing a pulled-down red baseball cap that cast a shadow on his face.”

“Now you are describing very well, keep it up,” said the First Investigator. “Clothes?”

“T-shirt, green without print, red jacket, jeans and loafers, I think. It all happened very quickly.”

“Wasn’t it still very warm at that time of day?” asked Bob. “I mean, because of the jacket and the long jeans...”

Jupiter gave Bob an appreciative look.

“Well, it was in the afternoon. Besides, if he was outside on his platform, it was very windy...”

“Okay, how tall was the man?” asked Jupiter.

“About your height, Jupe. He then said he had to do something inside, and that I should wait for Xenia for a moment.”

“He mentioned her name?” Jupiter asked. “How did the conversation go exactly?”

Pete tried to remember. “Hi. You must be Pete.” I said ‘yes’, and that I was here with Xenia to help you hang a picture. He asked: ‘Is Xenia outside?’ I nodded. Then he said: ‘Wait for her here, please. I have to do something inside.’ Yes, that’s how it was, I think.”

“And what did you say back?”

“I hardly got a word in. I think I said ‘okay’.”

“Did he seem nervous?” Bob asked.

“Well, as I said...” Pete recalled the scene to mind. Forster had been standing perhaps a metre away from him. He seemed more pressed for time than nervous... or was it even possible to tell? His left hand had been playing with his right earlobe, but what did that mean? It could simply be a habit.

“I don’t think so,” the Second Investigator finally replied. “More likely he was in a hurry. I don’t know. You can certainly judge something like that better if you know each other well. In any case, he went straight to the living room.”

“Did you see more of the inside of the living room when you were waiting?” Jupiter continued to probe. “Was there was another person?”

“He slipped in very quickly,” said Pete. “Besides, I wasn’t paying attention. Then he closed the door... and I waited.”

“How long?”

“Maybe one or two minutes, that’s all. Then I heard the cries for help.”

“What did he shout exactly?” Jupe wanted to know.

“Help me! Come quickly, I’m being threatened! Help!”

## 7. Who is Xenia?

“Forster obviously phoned the police there and asked for help,” Jupiter noted.

Pete nodded. “That’s what it sounded like. Then, of course, I rushed into the room. Forster was on the viewing platform. It’s sort of like the platform they built overlooking the Grand Canyon.”

“Where exactly was the man standing?” Jupiter enquired.

“Well, by the railing on the platform!”

“Can you be more precise?” asked Jupiter. “It could be important, Pete.”

The Second Investigator closed his eyes. “Not quite at the end. There was a strut—a v-shaped strut—in the railing on the right-hand side. He was standing right there.”

“Good,” Jupiter praised, “and in what posture?”

Somewhat unwillingly, Pete dived deeper into his memory. “Turned to the side, but with his head facing away from me. He held a mobile phone at his ear.”

“Did he speak?”

“I think not, then. Probably my appearance surprised him.”

“Facial expression?”

“I can’t see his face. It was turned away from me.”

“If you did not see his face, how could you tell that you surprised him?”

“You’re worse than Detective Ella,” Pete said, pausing for a moment. “In any case, I then saw him fall over the railing.”

“How exactly? Did he jump?”

“You mean on purpose? No, he kind of tipped over, as if he lost his balance. Upper body first, legs lifted off, a bit like a jackknife. His cap flew off before he hit the water. Is that enough? I don’t want to recall that scene again, Jupe!” Pete’s breath quickened and his gaze wandered around the trailer.

“It’s important,” Jupiter said. “We’re almost through.”

“So you saw Forster fall...” Bob said. “How did you get to the platform so fast?”

Pete twisted his mouth. “When I rushed into the living room, I saw him out on the platform. I then ran to an open window and from there I saw him fall. That’s quite a way down, at least twenty metres! I leaned out and saw him hit the water. The water splashed up. That was all.”

“How did he hit the water?” asked Bob.

“What do you mean how he hit the water? He plunged straight down head-first into the water. Then the current dragged him away. After that, there was no more sign of him.”

“How do I imagine it spatially?” asked Jupe. “The viewing platform... and the window?”

“A very long living room, not very wide but very long. The whole front is glazed with a view of the sea. In the middle was the exit to the platform. On the right and left, there were sliding windows. I went to an open window on the right,” Pete explained.

“What does the platform look like?”

“It’s a cantilever deck—I think that’s what it’s called—made fully of steel and painted red. The deck is supported by joists that extend out from the house. Of course, there’s a railing all round the deck.”

Jupiter asked Pete to sketch the layout of the living room and the platform on the flip chart on which he had already made some notes.

“There was still a TV on,” Pete suddenly remembered.

“Can you remember the programme?” asked Jupiter.

“Something about burglars, I think,” Pete said.

“Maybe that’s what scared him,” Bob speculated. “Something must have triggered a reaction. Last night on the phone, you mentioned that there might have been another person in the room. I’m thinking of those two guys who came to see us...”

“It was just a feeling,” Pete said. “He did yell out that he was being threatened.”

“Where do you think this other person had been and where he could have disappeared to?” asked Jupiter.

Pete shrugged his shoulders.

“We have to look at the situation on site,” the First Investigator decided. “I have high hopes of spotting more clues.”

“I don’t want to go back there!” cried Pete. Everything in him resisted.

Jupiter thought about it for a moment. “For the time being you don’t have to, even if it would help Bob and me. If the police catch you there, it wouldn’t exactly improve your situation. We don’t want to risk that.”

Relieved, Pete bit into his sandwich. He hadn’t had time to eat in the last few minutes because of all the talking.

“Then there’s Xenia,” Bob said.

Pete rolled his eyes upwards in exasperation. “You really are worse than that Ella,” he muttered.

“We want to help you,” Bob said gently.

Pete finished chewing. “Xenia. I don’t know her last name... About my age... a bit shorter than me... Long, reddish-blonde hair with two braids; sporty type; pretty face; average surfer; white shorts and brown sandals; blue T-shirt.”

“Did she use your mobile phone?” asked Jupiter abruptly.

“No, of course not.” Pete hesitated. “Why?”

“Because you said Detective Ella claimed there was a phone call from you to Forster!”

Pete thought about it. “When we were about to leave, she asked me to show her a photo I had taken on the beach. Xenia only held the phone for a while and then put it back on the dashboard.”

“Did you watch what she was doing with your phone?”

“No, I was driving off... I presumed that she was just flipping from one photo to another. Besides, I should have heard her talking to someone.”

“Why didn’t she go straight into the house with you?” Jupe asked.

“Her phone rang and she stepped aside to answer it.”

“Her phone rang?” Jupe remarked. “When?”

“Uh... when we reached the house... in fact, after we got out of my car.”

“Didn’t that make you suspicious?”

Pete groaned. “What was there to be suspicious of when a phone rings? Of course, I didn’t suspect anything bad! And one is always smarter in hindsight, Jupe.”

“Okay, okay,” Jupe said. “So she stepped aside to answer the call. What did you do?”

“She told me to go ahead and ring the door bell and that she would be right with me.”

“—And so you did just that,” Bob interjected. “Okay. Anyway, it’s very puzzling that she just disappeared after that. Maybe she watched the whole incident from somewhere and took off in a panic.”

“Although the chances of finding her might be slim,” Jupiter said, “you should go back to the Oxnard beach and search or ask around for her.”

“How, without a car? The police took it away. There are probably millions of forensics people buzzing around my poor MG like blowflies right now.” Then Pete remembered something else. “I’m not allowed to leave Rocky Beach either. I have to be available for questioning.”

Jupiter nodded. “Okay, then Bob and I will check out Forster’s house first.”

“I’m sure the police have cordoned that off,” Pete objected.

Just then, the telephone rang. It was Pete’s father, asking for his son. Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker.

“The police called, Pete,” his dad said. “Detective Ella has some more questions for you and she’s coming to Rocky Beach. She’ll bring your mobile phone. After that, you can pick up your car at Oxnard, but first, you’re supposed to be at the Rocky Beach Police Department at nine.”

“No, Dad, I don’t want to go there.”

“Inspector Cotta will be there. After all, Rocky Beach is his kingdom. Maybe that’s the good part of the news.”

“Yeah, sure,” Pete replied.

So he had to bear with more interrogation—first it was Ella, then Jupe and Bob, and now it was back to Ella. How long was this going to go on?

Jupiter looked at him almost a little sympathetically. At least that was Pete’s impression. It was an unusual trait in the First Investigator.

“Don’t worry about it, Pete,” Jupiter said.

“We’ll get you out of this mess,” Bob added. “You haven’t done anything wrong, so how are they going to prove you’re guilty?”

“Detective Ella will think of something,” Pete said glumly.

“So will Jupiter Jones,” countered the First Investigator.

## 8. An Interesting Encounter

“Turn right over there,” Jupiter said.

Bob braked and steered his Beetle off the Pacific Coast Highway into the nondescript, gravel road. To the right of the road, a hand-painted sign stopped the desire of uninvited visitors to venture further: ‘Devil’s Cliff—No Access to Beach! No Parking!’

Cautiously, Bob accelerated and the car bumped along the road. The stones crunched under the pressure of the tyres. For a while, he drove along wild bushes that grew on both sides of the road, blocking the view of the coast. Then he saw a junction ahead.

“Paul Forster’s house should be on the right,” Jupiter said.

Bob braked. “What’s on the left?”

Jupiter looked at the map he had downloaded from the Internet onto his mobile phone. “There is another house there—about 300 metres away, also on the coast.” He looked up. “Bob! I know what you’re thinking. Maybe there are witnesses!”

Bob nodded. “So where to first?”

“Forster’s house,” the First Investigator decided. “To be on the safe side, we’ll park the car somewhere hidden and approach the house on foot. If the police are on the scene, we have to keep out of the way.”

Bob was about to drive off when suddenly a blue pick-up truck rushed towards him from the left road. Both vehicles had to brake sharply to avoid an accident. Behind the wheel of the pick-up was a man of about fifty. He waved apologetically and backed the truck up until it came to a stop in a small bulge behind the bend. Then he lowered the side window. Bob drove up beside him and opened his window as well.

“Please excuse my pace,” the man said, looking at Bob through his thick dark glasses.

“Normally no one comes along here. Are you lost?”

Bob wondered if he should come out with the truth. “We wanted to see a bit of the area.”

Jupiter leaned over to the driver’s side. “We’re looking for hidden beaches!”

“Hmm...” The man’s expression became suspicious. “There’s no access to the beach from here,” he said. “Didn’t you see the sign? You’ll have to excuse me but one should be suspicious these days. Something terrible happened to my neighbour only yesterday!”

Jupe thought about it for a moment. Opportunities should be seized. “Honestly, that’s also the real reason we’re here,” he said. “Jupiter Jones is my name, and my friend’s is Bob Andrews. I’m sorry to bother you. I presume that you must be Mr Forster’s neighbour.”

“That’s right,” the man said. “I’m Ken Lauderdale... but what have you got to do with Paul’s death?”

“We are friends of the boy who was on the scene yesterday when it happened,” Jupiter said without immediately revealing too much.

Mr Lauderdale nodded. “The police came to my house and mentioned that there was a suspect,” he said. “So Crazy Paul was right after all... but I never would have thought of a boy being involved—more like gangsters, thugs, violent criminals...”

“What makes you think of that?” asked Jupiter.

Lauderdale looked at him and it seemed as if he was pondering whether or not to trust these two boys who suddenly appeared in the vicinity.

“It’s important,” Jupiter followed up. “Our friend is suspected of murder but he is innocent. We must stand by him. Maybe you can help us with that.”

Lauderdale nodded. “All right,” he said, pointing his finger back down the road. “Drive to my house and put the car in the front yard. I’ll turn around and follow you. Actually, I was going to do some shopping, but there’s still time.”

A good five minutes later, Jupiter and Bob were sitting in two rickety camping chairs on the wooden patio of Lauderdale’s house. A little further out, the Pacific roared against the rocks.

Unlike Forster’s house, Lauderdale had not built his right up against the cliffs. It was just a simple log house, and although it looked a little run-down, it was a nice place to be for someone who wanted peace and quiet from the world. The most exciting thing, as Jupe had immediately discovered, was that from the patio one had a view of Paul Forster’s house. Part of the fancy building could be seen and, above all, the viewing platform jutting out. However, the distance gave little reason to hope that Lauderdale could have witnessed the cliff fall. At least one could make out how many people were on the platform. At present, only one person could be seen moving back and forth along the railing. Jupiter guessed it was a police officer. It was good that the two investigators had come to Lauderdale’s place first.

Meanwhile, Mr Lauderdale had gone inside the house to get something to drink. Now he stepped out in his slightly scruffy jeans and washed-out T-shirt, bringing with him a water bottle and several glasses on a tray.

“Nice here, isn’t it?” he said. “—But also very lonely. It gets even lonelier without Paul.”

“Only Forster and you live around here on this rocky peak?”

Lauderdale sat down and poured water into the glasses. “Yep, me for about three years and Paul for longer.” He looked at Jupiter. “So your friend had something to do with his death?”

“He was in the house when it happened, let’s put it that way. Mr Lauderdale, you said something earlier that ‘Paul was right after all’?”

“He was suffering from paranoia... even when I first came here,” Lauderdale said. He took off his glasses and blew a few grains of dust off the lens. “He had been very suspicious of me for a long time. Eventually he came to trust me, but lately, unfortunately, his condition has worsened. He was even treated for it.”

“Was there a specific reason for this?”

“For his fear?” Lauderdale nodded vigorously. “Yes, supposedly. Only I never took him seriously. He said that his former girlfriend was following him, stalking him, threatening him, and even sending gangsters after him. He was then living on the East Coast, in the New York metropolitan area. Eventually he left and came over here. ‘Changed coasts,’ as he put it.”

The man took a sip and looked over at Forster’s house. “The police have been here all morning,” he said. “They questioned me but I told them I didn’t see anything.”

Jupiter was disappointed as he had hoped for a witness. “Nothing? Nothing at all?”

“You can only see the house from this point. I was inside taking a nap when I think it happened.”

“Heard nothing either?”

“Heard?” Lauderdale thought. “You mean a scream or something that might have woken me up? No, I’m afraid not.”

Pete hadn’t said anything about it either. There had been no scream, only the sound of the sea.

“Another question,” Bob said. “If Mr Forster was suffering from paranoia, would his property be equipped with surveillance cameras?”

Lauderdale laughed. It was a deep, almost desperate laugh. “Yes, it was! Cameras front, back and by the sea—until a while ago. That’s when Paul’s madness got to the point where he dismantled everything because he was afraid someone would hack in the system and monitor him. I advised him against it, but he did it anyway. He even got rid of his computer! Really crazy...”

“So there wouldn’t be any video recordings to help us,” Jupiter concluded.

“As far as I know, yes,” Lauderdale said.

“How tall was Mr Forster?” asked Jupiter.

“I’d say... like you and me.”

“Do you have a photo of him?”

“Unfortunately, no. He hated photos of himself.” Lauderdale’s gaze fell on the landscape where Jupe had also noticed a brief flash. “The police have finished their work and are going off,” the man said. “There’s a little spot among all the brush where you can see the road.”

“We’ve kept you long enough, Mr Lauderdale,” Jupiter said and stood up. “May we approach you again if necessary?”

“You’re leaving already? I’d love to, I’m very happy to have visitors!” Lauderdale also rose.

“Fine.” Jupiter smiled. “Oh, one more thing—did you see a girl yesterday? She was on foot.”

Lauderdale shook his head regretfully.

“Does the name Xenia mean anything to you?”

The man did not think long. “No. Who is that supposed to be?”

“Forster could have mentioned her once or so.”

“Not to me.”

“How well did you know your neighbour?”

“Quite well, actually. In fact, I don’t think he had as good a connection with anyone as he did with me. This doesn’t mean much, because he hardly had any contact with anyone... but he also kept a certain distance from me. Maybe that’s because of our different lifestyles. Above all, he had more money, as you can see from his extraordinarily and lavishly built house. He was reluctant to visit my little hut here. I was supposed to go to him now and then. In any case, the love of this place united us.” He took a deep breath and looked out to sea.

“We thank you,” Jupiter said and turned to go. The police had disappeared, the coast was clear now.

## 9. At the Accident Scene

“Do you think this Lauderdale was the mysterious third person who might have been in Forster’s living room when Pete rushed in?” asked Bob as he got back behind the wheel and drove off.

“I don’t think so,” Jupiter replied, “but it’s more like a feeling.”

“At least we got some clues from the neighbour,” Bob said. “So Forster felt he was being followed by his ex-girlfriend. Lauderdale doesn’t believe it, but maybe she really did send those two guys out to confront Forster.”

“We have to look for clues about this woman.” Jupiter thought. “Besides, I should have asked Lauderdale who Forster was being treated by.”

“There will be papers in his house,” Bob said, “like some medical records. We... we’re going to his house now, aren’t we?”

Jupe nodded. “Of course. I’d like to have a look at everything on site.”

“—But the police should have cordoned off the crime scene.”

“The police will do their job... and I wouldn’t call the place a crime scene—more like an accident scene. Hopefully the police will have realized that by now, and if they haven’t, we’ll just have to help them out.”

“I suppose you intend to break into the house, right?”

“Maybe we’ll take a look at everything from the outside first. That should be no problem.”

In the meantime, they had reached the junction in the road. Bob resolutely turned left. They went around two bends, then suddenly a small gate appeared, behind which a forecourt stretched out. To the side, a fancy Mercedes SUV was parked in a carport.

“That should be Forster’s car,” Jupiter said.

From here, the house did not look very spectacular. A step led to the massive entrance door, next to which the only window—small and barred—was set back here, probably to see from the inside who was approaching the house. As expected, the door was cordoned off with police tape.

Bob discovered a space between gnarled bushes and steered the Beetle into it and parked there. This way it was not visible from the driveway.

They got out and looked around. Muffled, they heard the sound of the waves. It smelled of spicy plants.

The house was a single-storey structure built on the rocks. On its right side, there was a steep drop of a few metres directly from the wall of the house. That was probably also the reason why the window that was very high up was not barred, but the two windows on the left side were.

“Pete said that Xenia stepped aside to answer a phone call,” Bob said, “and she was not seen after that. Maybe she went down that path?”

A small sloping footpath led around the house in an arc on the right. Jupiter and Bob followed the path. After a few metres, the First Investigator discovered a small shed hidden in the vegetation. It was unlocked.

Carefully, Jupiter pushed the door open. Inside it was dark. While Jupiter slipped into the shed, Bob kept watch, because by now he had the distinct feeling that they were not alone here.

Finally Jupiter called out from inside: "Hey, Bob! Give me a hand!"

Bob stepped up to him. His friend held one end of an extendable ladder in his hands. "For the unbarred window," said the First Investigator with a grin.

Bob nodded and looked around briefly, but didn't see anything conspicuous. Together they carried the ladder to the house.

On the way, Bob asked: "What else was in the shed?"

"A whole mountain of old security cameras in a box. So Lauderdale was telling the truth. Well, there are all sorts of junk that might interest Uncle Titus."

They reached the house. Jupiter cast an appraising glance upwards. They had to climb about four to five metres, which should be doable. They pushed some bushes away and Jupiter positioned the ladder. Rung by rung he climbed up.

When he reached the window, he paused and looked in. "It's a bedroom," he announced. The window could be opened without any problems. Carefully, Jupe pushed a bright-green curtain all the way aside and climbed inside. Bob followed him.

It was a tastefully furnished room. The large bed, the bedside table and the wardrobe were obviously from a furniture series, plus a wide room divider covered with parchment, a bedside lamp, and a chest of drawers, on which was a vase with dried flowers. Everything was very neat. Above the bed hung a photo of a mountain landscape painted on canvas. Jupiter guessed that it was a scene in South America.

"We'd better pull up that flashy ladder," said Bob.

Jupiter nodded. It was not easy to do that. When they had managed it, there was quite a scratch on the wall of the house.

"I'll start looking around here in the bedroom," Jupe decided. "Perhaps you can check the other rooms."

Bob agreed and stepped out of the bedroom.

Immediately, Jupiter's eyes caught something interesting on the bedside table. It was a framed photograph leaning against the wall. He grabbed the photo and looked at it.

There were two men in the photo, and one of them was Lauderdale. The other was probably Forster. The quality of the photo was not very good. It had been taken on the viewing platform, backlit in the evening. Forster's face was hard to make out. He had a beard, and a few black curls spilled out from under his red baseball cap. Pete had not mentioned a beard.

Jupiter had wanted to take the photo with him, but he hesitated. He then pulled out his mobile phone and took a photo of it instead.

Next, he searched the wardrobe, which he only found clothings. Then he went on to the chest of drawers. Again, there were only clothings but when he reached the lowest drawer, he felt around and discovered something—a disc of some sort. He took the thing out and saw that it was an embroidered badge of about 50 millimetres in diameter. He could make out the acronym 'FELCN' on it. Again, he pulled out his mobile phone and took a photo of the badge before placing it back in the drawer.

Meanwhile, Bob found himself in the entrance hallway Pete had spoken of. There were several doors leading off and he decided to check each one out. As expected, one door led to the kitchen and another to the bathroom. The one thing he noticed was that the windows in both these rooms were barred. Besides that, there was nothing suspicious there.

When Jupiter entered the hallway, he saw a large cupboard by the side. He attempted to open it but it was locked. Meanwhile, Bob peered through a small hallway window facing the forecourt. There was no one there. However, between the bushes, he could see a bit of his car.

With nothing left to inspect, Bob nodded to Jupiter and the First Investigator pushed open the next door which was to the living room.

“Wow!” Bob exclaimed.

A magnificent view greeted them. The full glazing allowed a wide view of the sea glistening in the sun. Waves were approaching and in the distance, there were two giant freighters. A few sailors could be seen on board. To the left and right, two rocky peaks protruded out like horns. This was probably what gave Devil’s Cliff its name. The cove had to be below them.

In the middle of the glass front was the door to the viewing platform. It was closed.

Before they went out, the two of them looked around the room. ‘Room’ was quite an understatement. It was a light-flooded, transversely stretched area of about ten by four metres. Various areas merged without being noticeable at first glance. On the far left was the dining area, with a tinted glass sliding wall to the kitchen. In the centre, directly in front of Jupiter and Bob, was an elegant leather couch with a view of the sea. Facing the couch on one side was a wide-screen television on an entertainment cabinet. Finally on the far right of the living room was a small workplace consisting of an elegant desk and a narrow bookshelf. Next to it was a huge mirror that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Everything seemed limited to the bare essentials, yet functional, valuable and stylish.

However, they had not come here to be amazed. Jupiter was already investigating how the door to the platform opened, because there was no handle and no lock. He finally found a switch on the floor, and sure enough—when he stepped on it, the glass slid aside. A gush of fresh sea air rushed in and filled the whole room within seconds.

The two boys stepped outside, cautiously at first, as if the platform might give way. Then with firmer steps, they walked forward. They reached the railing and looked down. Deep below them, as described by Pete, the water raged in a kind of rocky cauldron. Waves broke in from the sea, which unloaded their force in a wild dance of water and foam. Indeed, it was hardly likely that one could survive a fall here.

Jupiter looked at everything very closely. Below them, a boulder jutted out of the water, regularly washed over by the waves. Again and again, the First Investigator changed perspective and bent over the railing. Finally he stopped at the spot Pete had described.

“Watch out!” shouted Bob against the noise of the waves. “The railing is pretty low.”

“Indeed,” Jupiter agreed. “In public facilities, this wouldn’t be allowed at all. Pete said that Forster was about my height. In fact, you can quickly lose your balance and tip over the railing...”

He looked at Bob. “I would like to try something.”

## 10. Re-enacting the Scene

The First Investigator moved closer to Bob so he didn't have to shout so much. "We'll re-enact the scene," he said, "here on the spot. You're Pete, I'm Forster."

"Scary," said Bob, "but only if you don't fall over!"

Jupiter pushed Bob back through the living room and posted him in the hallway next to the main door. "This is where we start. Just knock on the door." With these words, he disappeared back into the living room.

Bob waited a moment, then knocked.

After about a minute, Jupiter appeared. "You must be Pete!"

"Yes," said Bob. "I'm here with Xenia to help you hang a picture." Bob heard a slight twitch in Jupiter's face. They hadn't even looked around to see if there was a picture waiting to be hung.

"Please wait for Xenia here," Jupe said, "I have to do something inside."

"Okay." Bob glanced through the gap in the door. He saw the right glass window where there was a coffee table in front of it.

Jupiter slipped into the living room and closed the door.

Bob waited. After another good minute, he heard shouting. He pushed open the door and stepped into the living room. Jupiter was standing on the platform, dangerously close to the railing. He had his mobile phone in one hand and a shoe in the other, which he now dropped.

"No!" Bob shouted automatically. He ran to the window and saw the last few metres the shoe covered before it hit the water. After a few seconds, the waves washed it up, and then it disappeared from Bob's view.

Now Jupiter took off his other shoe and dropped it. It landed on the jagged boulder between the waves and then bounced into the water as well. Jupiter now looked at his mobile phone. Apparently he was timing the drop.

"What have you done to your shoes?" shouted Bob, running onto the viewing platform.

"It doesn't matter at all now," Jupiter shouted back. "It was trampled enough and I have another pair in your car." He motioned Bob to go back inside with him.

Once inside, Jupiter closed the door and window. Instantly it was significantly quiet—clearly the result of an effective noise-reducing system Forster had installed for his living room.

"What did I shout," Jupiter asked, "when you were waiting for me in the hallway? What did you hear?"

"Not too clear—'Help, I'm being threatened' or something! The sound of the sea muffled out a lot."

"I didn't call out 'I'm being threatened,'" Jupiter said. "That's just what your brain tells you because Pete told you something like that. It was more the words: 'Bob has pimples!'"

"Bob has pimples?"

"I couldn't think of anything better just now, but what is much more important is that our re-enactment shows that Pete could not have heard Forster's cries for help very well... and I really did shout! If the police have checked this, it won't exactly speak in Pete's favour because it weakens his testimony."

“But Pete is innocent!”

“We know that, Bob.”

“And how do you explain all this?”

“I don’t have an explanation yet.”

“Great!”

“For that, I calculated that—with a measured fall time of 2.1 seconds, the sea must be at a depth of about twenty metres. Pete and you—both reacted quickly, and were at the window in about a second.”

Bob nodded. “Yes, I saw your shoe splash into the water.”

“—And we can also clear up another point now,” Jupiter said. “Turn around...” There was the couch, further back were a desk and three paintings hanging on the wall.

“You mean there’s not a painting lying around or anywhere waiting to be hung up?” asked Bob.

“That, for one thing, and this fact certainly does not support Pete’s credibility in the eyes of the police... but I was thinking of something else...” Jupiter pointed to the mirror—a huge thing that had caught their eyes earlier when they had looked around. Now he decided to go look at it more closely.

The mirror was a stark contrast to the other no-frills furnishings. It looked like an oversized piece of baroque furniture that appeared to be leaning against the wall at an angle, but was in fact firmly fixed onto the wall from floor to ceiling, and from which Bob was now staring at his reflection.

“Pete sensed the presence of another person. I’m afraid he caused the feeling himself.”

“Like in a clothing store—where you keep thinking you’re being watched, and when you turn around it’s some mirror or mannequin?”

Jupiter nodded. “People think the shop has more people than actual. I’m afraid there was no one here except Pete.”

“But that doesn’t prove it, Jupe.”

“True, it’s a theory. Now I would like to rummage through Forster’s documents.”

However, Bob wanted to check the situation first. He went into the hallway and looked through the small window out to the forecourt.

“Hey, Jupe!” he whispered. “There’s someone outside!”

Immediately the First Investigator came next to Bob and peered out. “I don’t see anyone.”

“There was a man. He crossed the driveway and disappeared into the bushes. I’m sure of it!”

“The neighbour? Lauderdale?”

“No, younger!”

“One of those two men who visited us at the salvage yard?”

“Neither. It is a guy with dark hair and sunglasses. Dressed casually. Let’s get out of here!”

“—And run straight into him?” Jupiter shook his head. “We’ll do what we set out to do and then we’ll see.”

Bob knew that Jupiter was right. It made no sense to rush out like startled chickens now, but what was the man doing? Did he know they were in the house? Luckily they had pulled in the ladder earlier. Still Bob had the feeling of being trapped.

Jupe was determined to look for more clues so he hurried back into the living room—straight to Forster’s workplace. When Bob joined him, Jupiter already had a folder on the desk and was leafing through it.

“Invoices,” the First Investigator said. “Here’s one from a psychologist’s office—a certain Dr Tomic in Oxnard.” Jupiter made a note of the address.

Then it was the turn of the drawers. Here were writing instruments, paper and the like, but nothing peculiar.

Bob, meanwhile, looked at the shelves, which had a few file folders. Forster seemed to have kept only the most necessary. Hastily, he opened the folders one by one.

“This one is interesting,” he murmured. “Do you remember his website for consultancy services?”

“Yes,” Jupiter said as he examined the desk for a secret compartment.

“All the invoices are in here. Every client has a number. The service is usually just general security advice. The hourly rates are horrendously high. Nevertheless, Forster can hardly have lived so luxuriously here because he seems to only have five or six clients a year. I’d like to know where he got his money.”

Jupiter looked up. “Let me see, please.”

Bob handed him the folder and together they leafed through it. Suddenly Bob looked up. Hadn’t there been a noise? Inside the house? He left the living room, went to the hallway and looked.

Nothing. Apparently he was already hearing noises... but there had been this man outside. Had he seen their car? Bob glanced out of the window again. There was nobody, so he went back to the living room.

At the desk, Jupiter had taken a step further in his findings. “Something was torn out of here,” he said, pointing to a narrow scrap of paper still stuck in the metal clip.

Bob looked at the spot with half interest. “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

“Just a moment!” Jupiter checked the papers in the folder for the numbering on the invoices. “The invoice for Client Number 37 is missing,” he said. “But why? And who could that be?” Hastily he flipped through the pages but found no clue.

“Maybe the client backed out,” Bob surmised, but he didn’t think it was anything important.

The First Investigator shook his head. “The invoice was torn off! What if it was the client himself who removed the document?”

“I don’t know...” Bob muttered. “Wait, here’s a folder marked ‘Offers’.”

Jupiter took it and both of them matched the offers with the invoices in search of Client Number 37.

Finally, they found it. It was an offer of security advice for a certain Mark Gonnese who was a resident in Malibu.

Jupiter looked up triumphantly. “We’ll pay him a visit,” he said. “Who knows what we’ll uncover.”

“—If we can get out of here unseen,” Bob added. He looked at his mobile phone. There were no new messages. “Have you heard anything from Pete?” asked Bob. “The meeting with Detective Ella and Inspector Cotta should be over by now.”

Jupe pulled out his phone, which he had set to silent during their stay at Forster’s house. Sure enough, there was a message from Pete! Jupiter read out:

*Hi fellas. Got my phone back. The interrogation with Ella was okay. Now she wants to go with me to the scene of the accident. Later I'll get my car back.*

Jupiter looked up. “Bummer, they’re coming here. We can’t let her catch us here!”

“When did Pete write the message?”

“More than half an hour ago. They should be here soon.” Jupiter looked around. “We have to put everything back in its place.”

They hurriedly began to do just that.

“How do we get out of here?” asked Bob as he checked that the door to the viewing platform was properly locked.

“We shouldn’t break the seal on the main door,” Jupiter decided, “so it’s back to the bedroom window.”

“What about that man outside?”

“We have to take that risk.”

Bob ran into the hallway and peered out onto the forecourt. “Here they come! A police car is pulling up! A woman and Pete next to her!”

Determined, Jupiter pulled Bob into the bedroom. He opened the window and looked out cautiously. Pete and the detective must already be on their way to the entrance. From there, they cannot see the wall of the house on this side.

Together the two investigators lowered the ladder as quietly as possible. When Bob had climbed out to the ladder, Jupiter heard the main door open.

“Jupe, you better hurry up!” Bob urged.

As Jupiter was climbing down the ladder, footsteps were already sounding in the hallway. Whoever that was outside watching them leave the house, it could not be helped now. However, they had to take precautions not to let Detective Ella see them else it could jeopardize Pete’s position further.

Slowly and quietly, Jupiter and Bob carried the ladder back into the shed. The fact that the First Investigator had to walk in socks did not make the action any easier.

On the way back to the Beetle, which Detective Ella had obviously not spotted, the two boys made a wide detour, got in the car and drove off without delay.

“That was close,” Bob said as he steered his car along the bumpy road. “—Because you can hardly hide in the house.”

“It is a high-quality, but economical facility,” Jupe stated as he slotted his feet into the heavy hiking boots that had been accumulating mould in the car since The Three Investigators’ last trip to the mountains. “What I’m only realizing now is that there are hardly any personal things around—like letters, souvenirs... except for this...” Jupiter took out his phone. “There is a photo of Lauderdale and another man, who is very likely to be Forster. This could be one of the few photos that exist of him. Also, I found an embroidered badge of some sort in the drawer. I now have photos of these two things so that we could check them out later.”

By now they had reached the junction with the highway. “Where to?” Bob asked. “Home or—”

“Oxnard,” Jupiter said, “to the psychologist.”

## 11. More About Forster

On the way to Oxnard, Jupe typed a short message to Pete to let him know where they were headed and also to ask him to search the beach for Xenia after the police was done with him.

After a few minutes, Bob turned into the street they were looking for. He parked in front of the building and they got out.

A discreet sign on the post of the finely crafted metal entrance gate said: 'Dr Marina Tomic, Psychologist'. A woman was there—armed with an iridescent green garden hose, watering the colourful plants in a small flower paradise. Jupiter thought she was dressed far too well for gardening.

"Dr Tomic?" Jupiter called over the fence.

The woman turned around. The water splashed aimlessly across the plants. "Yes?"

"What a wonderful garden!" Bob exclaimed with as much appreciation in his voice as possible.

"Unfortunately, my gardener is ill," said Dr Tomic. "What would you like? Are you looking for counselling or a part-time job?"

"Neither," Jupiter replied. "We need your help... and some urgent information, please. Can you spare us a few minutes?"

The woman laughed. "That way, please..." She pointed to her patio where there was a table with four chairs. "I can only spare you five minutes."

"We won't take much of your time," Jupiter assured her and trudged through the driveway.

Dr Tomic's gaze fell on his sturdy footwear. "Unusual footwear for this weather," she commented.

"I'm afraid my sports shoes got wet," Jupiter replied. "Luckily I have these boots with me."

Dr Tomic turned off the water and they sat down on the patio. "So, what's this about?"

Jupiter had anticipated that the conversation would not be easy. Of course, he knew that the psychologist had to maintain confidentiality about her work with her patients. However, she might make an exception when it came to an alleged death and a friend under suspicion.

Jupiter introduced Bob and himself by name and got straight to the point: "Perhaps you have heard about the accident of one of your patients?"

"Not that I know of."

"It's about Mr Paul Forster."

The psychologist looked up. "Who said he was one of my patients?"

Jupe had expected this question. "A friend," he gave a little white lie. "Mr Lauderdale. He told us." After all, he probably would have told if Jupiter had asked him.

In any case, the reference to Lauderdale seemed to convince the psychologist. She let Jupiter continue talking and he told her in brief what had happened.

"And the police now suspect your friend?" the psychologist asked.

"Yes," said Bob.

"And you see it quite differently?"

"Pete, Bob and I practically know each other inside out," Jupiter said.

“Still, you could be subjected to surprises when it comes to the human psyche,” Dr Tomic said. “I have experienced a lot in that regard. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No thanks,” Bob replied. “We don’t want to keep you for long.”

“I know that you are not allowed to say anything about your patients,” Jupiter continued. “Therefore, perhaps you would let the two of us speak first. You could then comment on what has been said as you see fit.”

The psychologist paused for a while and then said: “Go ahead...”

“Firstly,” Jupe began, “we know that Paul Forster suffered from paranoia.”

“That’s probably what that Mr Lauderdale told you,” Dr Tomic said.

Jupiter nodded.

“And that’s why you’ve come up with an alternative theory to Mr Forster’s death.”

Jupiter nodded again.

“So you want to know in general whether paranoia could be a trigger for such an accident, assuming a corresponding impulse has occurred.”

“I couldn’t have said it any better.”

“Well, that is indeed a generally conceivable scenario.” Dr Tomic said and smiled.

“Was his case difficult?” asked Jupiter directly.

“I can’t say anything about that, but there are patients in general who are difficult to see through. Sometimes you think they are faking and are just good actors, other times, you are completely convinced.”

“And you weren’t sure about Forster?”

“I just said that in general, you can never be sure about people.”

Jupiter now understood how he had to talk to Dr Tomic. “So there are cases where men are pursued, almost stalked, by their former girlfriends?” he continued.

Dr Tomic nodded. “It does happen that way, but most of the time it’s the other way round.”

“And also men who feel threatened by it?”

“Especially if they feel the woman has sent thugs after him,” Dr Tomic said. She frowned and took a breath. “But now, I have shared enough of my psychology knowledge with you. I wish you every success in your endeavours. If the police need an opinion and can justify that in court, I will be happy to help.”

“Thank you,” Bob said.

“One more question, please,” Jupe said. “Was the name Xenia ever mentioned during your therapy sessions?”

“Xenia?” Dr Tomic shook her head. “No. I don’t recall anyone mentioning that name to me.”

“We are very indebted to you,” Jupiter said, stood up and said goodbye.

“As expected, we just can’t get a straight answer from her!” Jupiter grumbled when they had left the property. “As least we tried...”

“Now what?” asked Bob. “Where are we going?”

“Our target is Client Number 37—Mark Gonnese,” Jupiter said. “On to Malibu.”

On the way there, Jupiter texted back and forth with Pete by mobile phone. The Second Investigator reported that he had survived the site inspection with Detective Ella and was now on his way with her to the Oxnard Police Department, where he could pick up his car.

“Have the police found Forster’s body?” asked Bob.

Jupiter passed on the question, but Pete did not know. Of course he had already asked, but Ella did not want to say anything.

Then Jupiter suggested that they meet later at the beach where Pete had met Xenia.

Pete wrote back:

*Okay, must stop now. Ella sucks!*

“That’s all from Pete at the moment,” Jupiter said. “We’ll proceed as planned to check on Mark Gonnese—someone who knows Forster and can hopefully give us more information about him. After all, we’ve already learned a lot out about Forster today. He was presumably suffering from paranoia; Lauderdale mentioned the former girlfriend; and the psychologist let it slip that Forster was difficult to see through, but confirmed that a certain stimulus might have triggered a panic reaction in him.”

“However, we have also discovered incriminating things,” Bob replied, “for example, Pete might not have heard Forster’s shouts very well.”

“That is one of the many oddities in this case,” Jupiter admitted.

“I also find it strange that Paul Forster suffered from paranoia on the one hand, but carried out security consultations on the other.”

Jupe shook his head. “In a certain way, it does fit together well. His ex-girlfriend stalks him, he protects himself and, in return for payment, passes on his experience of it to other people who, for whatever reason, also have a need for security systems.”

“Maybe this woman sent Esprit and Tattoo after him... but how do we get more information about them?”

“Maybe Forster did tell this Gonnese something,” the First Investigator surmised. “Everyone blabs at some point, even if they are careful.”

Jupiter looked for the address and directed Bob there. They had to cross the city and reached a chic suburban neighbourhood that lay on a slope in front of the coastal mountains.

Gonnese’s house was enthroned like a small palace at the end of a palm-lined cul-de-sac. Jupiter saw immediately that the man had chosen the quietest and largest property. It was secured by modern surveillance cameras. At least Forster hadn’t talked him out of it.

Bob parked near the driveway, which was locked by a heavy steel gate. There was no name plate, but there was an intercom.

“Yes?” it sounded from the speaker.

“Mr Gonnese?”

“Yes. Who is this?” Even through the speaker, it was an audibly strong, confident voice.

“I’m sorry to disturb you. We are, in a way, acquaintances of Paul Forster’s,” Jupiter said.

There was a short silence, and then came the reply: “So what?”

“He had an accident. I don’t know if you’ve heard about it yet. It happened last night.”

“Oh, that’s why he didn’t pick up his phone... A car accident?”

“No, it’s stranger... and we’d like to talk to you about that for a moment because there are some strange circumstances about it. He advised you on security issues, so that might be important.”

“I’m not sure what you are getting at...” he said and was silent for a moment before saying: “Anyway, come on in.”

A buzz sounded and a small door set into the steel gate swung open.

Jupiter and Bob entered. The door fell gently shut behind them. They found themselves in park-like grounds—perfectly manicured lawns, symmetrically arranged trees, colour-

coordinated flowering shrubs. The driveway led around a pond to the house.

A door was now opened and an elderly gentleman appeared. He had to be around seventy and was dressed in elegant casual clothes. His sharp gaze examined the two investigators. As they came closer, he pointed to Jupiter's boots. "You're not coming in here with those! Take them off or we'll sit outside."

"Of course," Jupiter said, removing his hiking boots.

Mr Gonnese led the boys into a reception room of sorts and pointed to a small table with four chairs around it. "There, please."

Jupiter and Bob took their seats. Gonnese sat down as well.

"You said something about strange circumstances. Is his violent girlfriend behind it?"

"So Forster told you about her," Jupiter said.

Gonnese looked at him searchingly. "Only a little—that she's from the East Coast. Somehow I think she made his life so difficult that he covered his tracks and went into hiding here."

"Do you know this woman's name?" Jupiter asked and at the same moment he felt that this question had come too soon as Gonnese might not trust them yet.

"I don't know her name," Gonnese then said somewhat hesitantly. "And wouldn't it be fitting if you first told me who you are, why you are asking me these questions and what happened in the first place?"

Jupiter introduced them both briefly and then went straight to describing the incident. "You may be familiar with the sensational viewing platform Paul Forster built at his house overhanging the cliff edge," Jupe continued. "As far as we know, he fell off from it down into the sea."

"How terrible," Gonnese murmured in dismay. "What a pity—he was such a good adviser... but what have you got to do with it?"

"Our closest friend was a witness to the fall, coincidentally..." Bob said. "He's blaming himself now because he can't explain what happened."

"Oh, poor thing! And how did you find me?"

Jupiter quickly said: "Mr Forster has a record of the consultancy service he provided you. Perhaps you can help us. Are you being followed as well? Or why did you hire a security consultant?"

"I was a successful artist," said Mr Gonnese, "but under a different name... in the classical music scene. A lot of nonsense has come up on social media about me and I'm not entirely blameless. Now I want to clean that up, and most of all I want to enjoy my peace and anonymity here."

Just then, a sportily dressed woman about ten years younger than Mr Gonnese entered the room. "Oh Mark, I see you have visitors... Aren't you going to introduce me to your guests?"

"My wife," Gonnese said in the direction of the boys. "This is Jupiter Jones and Bob Andrews. The two of them wanted to tell me something about Paul Forster. He fell off his platform into the sea!"

"Oh, no! Is he dead?"

"That is to be assumed," Jupiter said.

Mrs Gonnese shook her head. "Terrible! And he and his partner wanted to introduce a new security device for our house."

Jupiter listened up. "His partner?"

"Yes, that nice gentleman, what was his name?"

"Lauderdale?" Bob helped out.

"No, it's Tony... something..."

“Tony Summer,” said Mr Gonnese, “yes, Tony Summer!”

“I didn’t know Mr Forster had a partner,” Jupiter said, trying not to let his surprise show. Bob was also perplexed.

Mark Gonnese took a breath. “Tony was only here once, measuring everything and muttering incomprehensible sentences to himself. I guess he was only responsible for the manual work.”

Jupiter took out his mobile phone and showed Mr Gonnese the photo of the two men. He pointed to Ken Lauderdale. “Was this the man?” he asked.

Mr Gonnese took the phone in his hand. He didn’t have to look long. “No, definitely not. Mr Summer is taller. I’ve never seen that man with the glasses next to Paul.”

Disappointed, Jupiter put his phone back in his pocket. “Do you know a girl by the name of Xenia?” he shot the next arrow into the blue. It was worth a try.

“Xenia? No. Who is that supposed to be?”

The two boys looked at each other. Xenia seemed to be a phantom-like person.

“There’s no point in all this questioning,” Mrs Gonnese said and took a breath. “Mark, why don’t you tell the boys about your last visit to Paul’s place. It was so strange!”

Mr Gonnese nodded. “It was very strange, indeed. I still don’t understand what that was about...” He faltered. “Well, Paul called to ask me to stop by his place.”

“In fact, I was the one who answered his call,” Mrs Gonnese interjected. “He asked if Mark could go to him quickly to check out a new security device. He had just set it up for evaluation but it had to go back to the manufacturer the same day. I asked if I should go as well, but he said very emphatically that he could sort it out with Mark alone. Well, so my husband set off.”

“Yes, I drove to his place,” Gonnese took over, “parked my car in front of the house...” He interrupted himself and looked at the boys. “Are you familiar with his place?”

“Yes,” Jupiter replied and Bob nodded.

“I rang the bell. He opened and let me into the hallway. Then he asked me to wait a moment as he had to do something. He just disappeared into the living room and left me standing there like a garden statue!”

As if electrified, Jupiter and Bob looked at each other.

“And then what happened?” Bob asked.

“Then I heard him calling. ‘Hello, it’s me’, or something like that, and ‘help!’ Actually I didn’t hear the exact words, but I found it strange. Maybe there was someone else with him and there was an argument, but I didn’t dare go in. I have quite a lot of respect for him and I didn’t want to intervene. Probably he would have been embarrassed. I kept waiting and suddenly everything was quiet. Then it got too much for me and I just left. Yes, I got out of the house, into my car and just drove off.

“Later he called and said that he was sorry. He claimed that he had made a mistake—the device was unfortunately of the wrong specifications and I had gone off too quickly or some such nonsense.”

“He talked his way out of it,” Mrs Gonnese said.

“Yes, he talked his way out of it,” her husband repeated.

Jupe and Bob were briefly at a loss for words. The situation had been virtually identical to Pete’s! Only that it had a different ending.

“That’s... unbelievable!” Bob finally said. “And this happened a week ago?”

“To the day,” said Mark Gonnese.

“And since then, there has only been this one telephone contact between the two of you?”

“Yes, but what does all this matter to you?”

“Because... our friend experienced almost exactly the same thing as you did,” said Bob.

## 12. The Black Van

After saying goodbye to Mr and Mrs Gonnese, Jupiter and Bob sat down in the Beetle to discuss everything.

Bob still couldn't believe it. "If Mr Gonnese had entered Forster's living room, he would have experienced the same thing as Pete did, wouldn't he?"

Jupiter nodded. "The whole thing was staged. Yes, that's how it looks like... but it's part of our job to always think of alternatives. There are contradictions that I haven't resolved yet."

"What do you mean, Jupe?"

Jupiter squirmed. He did not like to talk about unlaid eggs. He preferred to save his thoughts so that he could pull them out of a hat at a crucial moment. However, Bob continued to look at him questioningly.

"For example," Jupiter said hesitantly. "Pete described how Forster tipped over the railing and fell down. Seconds later, he hit the water."

"I know," Bob said.

Somewhat saddened, Jupiter looked down at his hiking boots. "I re-enacted the fall with my shoes. I held one shoe right next to the railing and dropped it. However, it did not fall into the water but onto a large rock that juts out of the water directly below the spot. Then it bounced off the rock into the sea. Before that, I had tried it with the other shoe. In order for it not to fall on the rock but directly into the water, I had to give it a significant outward swing."

It took Bob a moment to draw the conclusion. "You mean Forster couldn't have just tipped over and fallen down?"

Jupiter took a breath. "After the experiment, unfortunately yes... and that casts doubt on Pete's testimony. It's to be feared that Detective Ella has drawn the same conclusion—if she's a good cop."

"Maybe it was the wind," Bob suggested. "The wind could have carried the body away from the cliff. Pete told us it was very windy, didn't he?"

"On the contrary, Bob," Jupiter argued. "The wind comes from the Pacific, so it would not have carried the body away from the cliff. Anyway, that shouldn't have been a decisive factor with such a heavy body."

Bob started the car and they drove back onto the highway.

"I don't think this case is just about a jealous ex-girlfriend," Bob said suddenly. "For example, where did Forster get all his money?"

"That's a good question," Jupiter remarked.

Finally they turned off to the beach where Pete had met Xenia. It was located just outside the city, directly below the highway. Only a rocky slope separated it from the road, next to which was a car park for visitors.

When Bob reached the car park, a good fifty vehicles were parked there. Many of them had surfboard racks mounted. Bob slowed down so that Jupiter could look out.

A narrow path led down to the beach. Apart from a small wooden shack with a few rickety tables in front of it, there were no buildings there.

Jupiter's gaze fell on the sea. Like dark shark fins, the surfers stood out of the deep blue water with their surfboards. Full of confidence, they waited for the perfect wave. Other surfers were on the beach. The First Investigator narrowed his eyes, but from a distance, he could not see if Pete was among them.

Just then, Bob spotted Pete's car. The MG was only a few metres in front of them. So Pete must be somewhere there!

After Bob parked his Beetle, the two of them made their way down to the beach to look for Pete. However, no matter how much they searched, Pete was nowhere to be seen.

Nervously, Bob glanced at the sea. "He won't be out there, would he?"

"His surfboard is still on the roof of his car." Jupe pulled out his mobile phone and called Pete. It rang for a while and nobody answered.

Then Jupe looked in his mobile phone for a good photo of Pete and showed it to the first surfer he saw. "Hey! Have you seen this guy today?" The boy shook his head.

Next, Jupiter approached a small group—three boys and two girls—but they have not seen Pete either.

Only at the third attempt did the First Investigator get lucky. "Sure, that's Pete! He was here yesterday. I talked to him for a while."

"And he's not here today?" asked Jupiter.

"Not that I know of," the young man said, shaking his long black hair. "Why?"

"We're friends of his," Bob replied. "By the way, do you know a person called Xenia?"

"Xenia? Yes, she was talking to him yesterday too."

At last! Bob and Jupiter glanced at each other—Xenia was not a phantom-like person after all! "Is she often here on the beach?" Jupiter continued to probe.

"I've never seen her before yesterday," said the surfer, making an effort to move on. "—And not today either. Sorry. Gotta go to work."

Jupiter and Bob nodded at him and continued trudging through the sand, holding Pete's photo under people's noses.

Finally, they succeeded again. "Pete, yes," said one girl. Several friends stood around her.

"He looks good," said another. "Is he with anyone?"

"How would I know?" the first girl replied. "Every now and then, he comes surfing here. He's really good at it! Today he obviously wanted to go out to the sea too."

"What do you mean?" Jupiter asked.

The girl took a step back. "Tell me," she said, "is this an interrogation? Who are you guys anyway?"

"His best friends," Bob said. "We're urgently looking for him."

"Then you're too late. About half an hour ago, I saw him at the car park, but then a van came along and he went in with it."

"A van?" asked Bob, aghast.

Immediately Jupiter had Esprit and Tattoo in mind. "Black?" he asked. "A black van with two people in it?"

"I only saw one man. He kind of led Pete into the back of the van... and yes, the van was black."

"Bummer!" said Jupiter.

"Not good news?" the girl asked.

Jupiter shook his head. "Sounds like an abduction."

"Abduction? It all happened very quickly... but now that you've said it, it did seem a bit strange to me..."

“Thanks for the information,” Jupe said and then turned to Bob. “Let’s go!”

They ran up the narrow footpath back to the car park. Breathing heavily, the First Investigator stopped in front of Pete’s car and pulled on the driver’s door. It was unlocked.

“They must have overpowered him here!” exclaimed Jupiter. “Pete hasn’t even locked his car yet. Maybe he managed to leave us a message.”

Bob ran around the car and searched the ground. “A mobile phone!” he shouted. “It’s actually Pete’s!”

“Bob, you know his passcode, don’t you?”

Bob nodded, tapped the display and unlocked the phone. “Apparently Pete was just about to text you,” he said excitedly and read out:

*Am now on the beach looking for Xenia. By the way, she reminds me of someone from way, way back. I think I saw someone like her once at a children’s birthday party, but I could be wrong.*

“That’s all,” said Bob.

“Pete didn’t realize he was being followed,” Jupiter noted. “He was lost in thought about this Xenia. Something occurred to him and he wanted to write to us. They must have surprised him in the process.”

The First Investigator thought for a moment. Then he dialled the number of the Oxnard Police Department. “It’s urgent! Officer James or Detective Ella please.”

After a short while, Officer James answered. Jupiter told him what he suspected. “Behind this are two men who visited us yesterday afternoon at The Jones Salvage Yard. One man introduced himself as Esprit de Cartuche. The second guy didn’t state his name.” Jupiter described the two suspects in more detail. Finally he gave the officer the licence plate number of the black van.

“That’s worth a lot,” the officer praised, but he also had some follow-up questions: “Did you witness Pete’s abduction directly?”

“No,” Jupiter said, “a surfer—a girl—told us everything.”

“And she was sure of herself?”

“That Pete was abducted?” Jupiter hesitated. He had, in a way, talked the girl into it a little, but it could not have been otherwise. “She witnessed the incident,” Jupiter said. “Pete was about to text us a message, but dropped his phone instead. We found it beside his car here at the car park. From this, it is likely that Pete didn’t go along with them voluntarily.”

“Okay,” said James. “I’ll organize a search party. If it’s only been less than an hour since the abduction, we’ve got a chance. Besides, I’ll inform Inspector Cotta. After all, these guys have also been hanging around Rocky Beach.”

“Thank you,” Jupiter said.

“I’ll keep you informed of any developments, Jupiter.”

“Is Detective Ella there?” asked Jupiter.

Officer James hesitated. “She spoke to Pete in Rocky Beach, went with him to Forster’s house. Later they came back here when she handed Pete his car back. I haven’t seen her since then.”

“Does she still suspect Pete?”

“You might ask questions... but first we have to find your friend! I’ll give you my mobile number, then you can reach me directly next time.”

When Jupiter finished talking, he received a grateful look from Bob. “It’s good that you informed the police,” he said.

“What else could I do?” replied Jupiter. “Pete is in danger! We haven’t a clue where to find the black van. Only chance or intuition can help us now, or the police.”

“—But why did the men abduct Pete?” Bob just couldn’t make sense of it.

Jupiter didn’t feel any different. “When this Cartuche showed up at the salvage yard, he was very conspicuous in asking about Pete. Pete must have seen or overheard something when he was at Forster’s place without realizing it... or they think Forster slipped him something.”

“But how did they even come up with Pete? Were they also at the crime scene and saw him?”

“Could well be,” Jupe said, “and then they couldn’t get to Pete because he was in police custody... Then there is another question—how did they know about us?”

Bob had no answer.

“Anyway,” Jupiter continued, “I hope that they won’t do anything to Pete because he probably can’t give them what they’re looking for.”

On the road, the ride in the cargo area of the black van had been bearable, but now the van had turned onto a poorly paved road. Pete clearly felt every pothole.

Next to him, two travel bags and a metal tool box slid around. The cargo area had no windows and it was correspondingly dark, but Pete had seen the bags when the man had pushed him inside the van. With every other turning manoeuvre, the hard tool box banged against Pete’s legs. In addition, his wrists were hurting from the cable ties used to tie him.

What did the men want from him? Pete had no doubt that they were the same guys who had asked for him at the salvage yard yesterday afternoon. The tattooed one had pushed him into the van. The other had stayed behind the wheel.

Pete’s had managed to glance at the driver. He wore arrogant-looking sunglasses that surely hid a piercing arrogant look, plus an arrogant moustache over an arrogant smile, topped by a beret just for showing off. That was how Pete would have liked to describe the man to someone.

Pete still had no clue as to what the men might be planning for him. If only he could hear what was going on in the driver’s cabin. However, the voices only reached him in a muffled way. The driver seemed to have spoken to someone on the phone earlier—perhaps someone who had engaged them to do this job. Somehow Pete didn’t believe that they were acting on their own accord.

“Ouch!” Again the toolbox hit his leg. How had he allowed himself to be taken by surprise like that! Hopefully Jupiter and Bob would find his mobile phone... but what would they do with it? Maybe they might read the message about Xenia.

He just couldn’t figure it out, but Xenia reminded him of someone—someone from a long time ago. He remembered seeing someone like her two or three times at birthday parties, but now, he just couldn’t figure out who that was. Still he could be wrong and it was just a coincidence. If not, was this a lead that Jupiter and Bob could work on?

Finally, the van slowed down and then stopped. The engine was switched off. Pete tensed his muscles. Now things were getting serious. The passenger door slammed shut, and Pete heard someone walking to the back of the van. It had to be Tattoo.

The rear door was yanked open. Bright light blinded Pete.

## 13. Back to Forster's House

Jupiter and Bob searched Pete's car at the beach car park, but they found nothing that helped them. The two friends closed the doors of the MG, ran to Bob's Beetle and drove off.

"We're going to Forster's place again," Jupiter decided as Bob turned onto the highway.

"Why?" Bob asked as he threaded the car into traffic.

"Maybe we missed something because on our first visit I mainly wanted to re-enact the course of events. After Mr Gonnese's surprising account, I want to check if there are other ways out of the house than through the main door. Meanwhile, I'll make a phone call to Pete's father."

"Are you going to tell him about the abduction?" asked Bob. "I don't know if that's appropriate right now."

The First Investigator hesitated somewhat with his answer. "That... is indeed the police's decision. I want to know from him if he remembers who were with Pete at children's birthday parties."

Bob nodded and Jupiter dialled the number. "Busy," he said. "He's probably talking to Officer James right now." Along the way, he dialled several times in vain. Finally, the answering machine picked up and Jupiter briefly explained what it was about.

"We'll have to be patient, Bob," Jupiter said and turned up the volume on his phone so that he wouldn't miss a possible callback.

Finally they reached the junction that led to Mr Forster's house. Bob turned off and at a reduced speed, they approached Devil's Cliff.

Bob parked his Beetle behind the bushes again and they got out. It was all as before, except that the sun had moved on and it had become darker. A few birds flew through the branches of the trees.

However, the First Investigator had other things on his mind. He strode towards the house. "Ella has put a new police seal at the door," he noted, "so we'll take the ladder again."

Bob nodded and they walked down the narrow path. However, Jupe did not stop at the shed. Following an impulse, he walked further along the path towards the sea until he reached a spot from which he could see the viewing platform from the side below.

Suddenly, he grabbed Bob by the arm. "There!" he whispered.

Just then Bob saw a shadow moving from the platform into the house. "There's someone on the platform! Who is that?"

Jupiter frowned. "I was under the impression that that was Lauderdale... and another person. It happened very quickly, and it's too far away so I could be wrong."

"But if it's Lauderdale, what is he looking for?"

"I would be interested to find out," Jupiter said thoughtfully. "Of course, his visit could have a harmless reason. Maybe he forgot something in the house."

"With the police seal in place, how did he get into the house?"

They stared at the house for a while, but nothing happened. Slowly Jupiter became nervous. "Okay," he finally said. "My plan is for you to lie in wait near your car and watch if anyone comes out of the house. If they do, you follow them."

"What about you?"

“I’m climbing in there.”

“You’re crazy, Jupe!”

“I need to know what’s going on. There is a game being played here and Pete is caught in it. Remember we’re doing this for him! The quicker we solve the case, the quicker we can get him cleared of suspicion. What other choice do we have?”

Bob couldn’t think of an answer to that. “Anyway, be careful,” he said.

“If you hide in the bushes next to your car, I can see you through the small hallway window. Give me a signal if the seal on the door is still intact. That means that the people are still in the house... if there is no other exit.”

Bob formed his right hand into an okay sign.

“And if I want you to come to me, I’ll give you a wave.”

“Okay, Jupe.” Silently they walked to the shed, carried the ladder to the house together and leaned it against the wall. Then Bob made his way to his car.

Jupiter carefully climbed up the rungs. Once at the top, he glanced into the bedroom. As far as he could see, no one was there. Just like the visit in the morning, the window could be pushed open without any problem.

The First Investigator then slipped inside.

Scorching heat penetrated the interior of the van. Then a shadow entered the light and Pete could make out that it was Tattoo. From the side of the cargo area he pulled out two licence plates and then reached for the toolbox.

“What are you going to do with me?” the Second Investigator asked in a brittle voice. His gaze fell outside. Crickets could be heard chirping loudly from the undergrowth. Obviously they were a long way away from civilization.

The man laughed and mocked Pete with a disguised peepy voice: “Help! Help!”

The driver’s door was opened and slammed shut. “Don’t make that noise, Butch!” A second shadow loomed. It was Esprit de Cartuche with his dark beret. “Come on, *rapidement*, Fix the front first and do it fast!”

The burly tattooed man, who was called Butch, instantly disappeared from Pete’s view.

“Can you at least untie my wrists?” Pete asked the Frenchman. “Please! I won’t run away.”

“Not until you answer a few questions for me, *mon cher ami*.” Esprit stepped out of the sun and was about to join Pete in the cargo area when his phone rang. He took a few steps to the side and answered the call. “*Oui?*... Yes, I have him, just as we discussed, *Madame!*”

Pete winced. So the client of the two was a woman! And she was obviously the boss because subsequently, Esprit only responded meekly: “Yes... Yes... *Bueno*... Of course... All right... Of course... *Puedes contar conmigo! Adios.*”

The man came back and put the phone in his jacket pocket with a wry grin. “The boss is... uh... how you say... a little impatient,” he said, his voice gaining momentum again. “Impatient—with you! Tell me what you know. The sooner you do you can get back on your surfboard.”

“If not what?” asked Pete.

Instead of giving an answer, Esprit pulled out a small dagger. Emphatically slowly, he balanced the tip on his upturned index finger. Then suddenly, his finger tossed the dagger up, it rotated once in the air and landed back on the tip of Esprit’s index finger. Pete flinched in shock. “It’s all a matter of practise,” the man said without setting the dagger down. “No blood—but only if you are precise.”

“And you can probably be very imprecise at times too,” Pete said. Esprit smiled wryly. “I like smart people.” Pete returned the smile in a tortured way. The man coughed and then looked at Pete seriously. “Read my lips, *mon ami*... where... is... he?”

Pete almost choked. “Where is who?”

“Stop playing games with me—Paul Forster of course.”

“In the sea. Drowned. Where else?”

“You can tell that to the police, *mon ami*, but I want to know the truth.”

“That’s the truth!”

“Tsk! Tsk!” Esprit shook his head gently.

Tattoo emerged and began to remove the car’s rear licence plate.

Esprit turned back to Pete. “That was a set-up. You and Forster are a team! You helped him!”

“No! I didn’t even know the man!”

Again Esprit tossed the dagger through the air and caught the tip with his index finger.

“Then why were you with him?” he asked slowly.

Pete was silent.

“I can’t hear you.”

“I... I...” Pete stammered.

“Why were you in his house?”

“I was there to help him hang up a picture,” Pete said, but read in Esprit’s face that he did not believe it. A mixture of anger and despair rose up in Pete. The third interrogation within twenty-four hours could well be the worst of all.

“You go to a man you don’t even know to help him hang a picture?” Esprit said sweetly. “—And suddenly the man falls to his death... *juste comme ça*? Did you scare him—the poor old guy?” He interrupted himself and then roared off: “Who do you think you’re talking to, *mon ami*?”

“Sir, I don’t know how it happened either!” cried Pete in despair. “I really only went there because of the girl Xenia. I gave her a lift from the beach to that house. Her car couldn’t start and I just wanted to help her!”

“A girl...” said Esprit. “*Comme c’est romantique*... lie! How about I now call you Pierre—Pierre *le Charmeur*!”

“But it was so!” said Pete emphatically.

“And the police believed you?”

The Second Investigator took a breath. “Detective Ella...”

“Ella... Ella... Ella...” Esprit repeated, smiling, with singsong in his voice. Then his tone became hard. “Why yes, sing at last, little birdie. You’re all in cahoots—you bloody investigators... you and him!”

“No! We don’t do crooked things,” Pete protested indignantly. “We are on the side of justice!”

Esprit had to laugh so hard he almost choked. “No lies? Trickery?” He winked conspiratorially at Pete. “Not an occasional... house break-in?”

“Only if it serves the truth!” shouted Pete.

Esprit took the dagger, pointed it at Pete and looked at him piercingly. Then he used it to scratch the dirt from under his thumbnail. “Butch, get in the van” he called out. “We’ll go to that Forster house and let our Pierre wriggle a little over the cliff. Maybe he’ll talk then...”

“With pleasure,” Butch replied. “I hope he doesn’t slip out of my hands in the process.”

Esprit tilted his head. “*Un de plus ou un de moins, ça ne change pas grand chose!*”

Pete swallowed. Even without a good knowledge of French he had understood that that meant: ‘one more or one less, it doesn’t make much difference!’

The two guys closed the rear door, got into the driver’s cabin and started the engine.

Meanwhile inside Forster’s house, Jupiter thought about pulling the ladder up to the bedroom... but then Bob would not be able to climb up. Perhaps he, Jupiter, needed the ladder himself as a quick escape route. After all, there could be at least two more people in the house. He had to prepare that they would not be exactly thrilled by his presence.

So he left the ladder against the wall of the house, especially as he could hardly pull the heavy thing up without Bob’s help.

Jupiter looked around the bedroom. Had anything changed since the last visit? As far as the First Investigator could remember, all the objects were still in place, including the photo.

The First Investigator thought of the embroidered badge that he found in the bottom drawer. He wanted to take a second look at it so he opened the drawer and reached in. However, the badge was gone. Had Detective Ella and Pete found it? Or had the men he had just seen taken it?

Jupe crept to the bedroom door that led into the hallway. Carefully, he turned the knob and pulled the door open a gap.

There was no one in the hallway. The First Investigator ventured a few steps forward and looked out through the small window into the car park. He noticed Bob crouched between the bushes.

When Bob saw Jupe at the window, he gave him the ‘okay’ sign. That meant the seal was still intact, and the people should be still in the house—so Jupe had to be careful!

Jupiter turned around. Slowly he walked towards the bathroom. There was a good chance that nobody was there, but he wanted to be sure and not be surprised unexpectedly. He opened the door. True enough, there was no one there. Then he went to the kitchen and found no one there as well, only the refrigerator was humming quietly. There was still the large cupboard, but just like before, it wouldn’t open.

Finally, it was the living room. That’s where the two of them had to be, if they were still here, whatever they were doing. Jupiter wondered whether he should dash in and take the two men by surprise or get Bob first. He hesitated and finally decided that having Bob with him was more sensible.

Jupiter crept back to the hallway window and gave Bob the arranged signal. Then he retreated to the bedroom. While waiting for Bob, he pulled out his mobile phone and tapped away on it.

Barely two minutes later, Bob’s head appeared in the window frame. “What are you doing?”

“I’m checking on South American organizations... but that can wait until later.” Jupiter stood up and helped his friend in. “There’s no one in the hallway, kitchen and bathroom,” he said, “so they must be in the living room. I figured that it’s best to handle this together.”

“I see,” Bob said sceptically, “it’s a lot nicer to face danger together.” He looked around for something he could use as a striking weapon in case of need.

“Hopefully we won’t have to use force,” Jupiter said, reading Bob’s mind. “After all, surprise is on our side, and maybe the two men are just sitting there playing cards.”

“—Or meditating facing the Pacific Ocean,” Bob said, “because it’s so breathtaking from here.” He took the dried flowers out of the vase and tucked the vase under his arm.

They crept into the hallway. Together they positioned themselves in front of the door that led into the living room. With a nod to Bob, Jupiter swung the door open.

“A very good day to you, gentlemen!”

## 14. Under Pressure

Jupiter stormed into the living room. Bob followed closely with the vase in his right hand which he held up threateningly.

Immediately the boys looked around the living room... but there was no one there! Dining table, pictures, mirror, couch, TV, desk and the breathtaking panoramic view— everything was there—but not two people.

The boys' eyes met in confusion.

"There's no one on the platform either," Bob whispered. "They must be hiding somewhere."

"But where?" Jupe wondered.

Nervously, the two of them crept back and forth between the furniture, always prepared for an attack.

"There are no hiding places here where full-grown men can fit in," Jupiter stated incredulously.

"—Or they are outside the house somewhere..."

Jupiter glanced out the window to the viewing platform. That was not possible. He could see the whole platform and there was no one there. Nevertheless, the First Investigator opened the glass door, stepped up to the railing and looked down.

A few moments later, he had seen everything he wanted. "There's nothing down there... unless they fell into the sea like Forster... but I don't think so." He pinched his lower lip.

"Perhaps there is a hidden door!" said Bob suddenly. "There must be a hidden door for them to escape... maybe even a hidden room..."

Jupiter let go of his lip and nodded. "Yes... they won't have disappeared just like that."

They took another look around the living room. "Theoretically, there can be many possibilities where you can install a hidden door," Jupe said, "but my hunch is—"

"—The mirror!" Bob exclaimed.

Together they stepped up to the room-high, walled-in mirror. Jupiter ran his hand over the elaborate carvings and ornaments on the silver frame, which looked as if it had been stolen straight from the castle of an old French king.

The First Investigator inspected the glass, but found nothing extraordinary. Then he tapped on it. It sounded very firm. The mirror frame also seemed solid and there was no gap between it and the wall. If there was a hidden door here, it was definitely well concealed.

Bob, meanwhile, had gone back into the hallway. "On the other side of the mirror is the large cupboard," he reported.

That could be it! The mirror had to be somehow connected to the massive wooden cupboard. "Can you open it?" Jupe asked. "Maybe that's where the hidden door is."

Jupe left the mirror and joined Bob who proceeded to turn the metal knob of the cupboard and rattle the door. Nothing happened. "It's stuck," he said.

"Let me try." With spirited movements, Jupiter tried to force the door to open but couldn't. "We have to break it open," he decided.

"Jupe!" Bob shook his head. "We can't just destroy the furniture here!"

“Hmm...” Jupe reconsidered and thought of other ways to approach this. On the surface of the door, in several places all around, regularly staggered small plastic attachments were fixed on the wood. “Do you have a knife?”

“No, but there should be one in the kitchen!” Bob ran off and came back with a simple kitchen knife.

Jupiter pushed it under one of the plastic attachments until the part popped off. The head of a screw appeared. The First Investigator repeated the procedure in two more places and also found screw heads. “That’s what I thought! The door is screwed tight, it can’t be opened at all... which means that there is no cupboard behind it, so—”

“—It is a hidden compartment!” said Bob.

“If this was a hiding compartment, then... there would only be space for one person, not two.” Jupe estimated. “Perhaps it is an opening that leads further down.”

“—Into the rock?”

Jupiter nodded. “The entrance must be the mirror, I’m sure of it. Come on, let’s look for the mechanism to open it!”

“But... this could be dangerous. What if we get locked in there? No one knows we’re here!”

“We’ll decide what to do if we manage to find the opening mechanism,” Jupe said.

Just then, Bob thought he heard an engine noise from outside.

With quick steps, he ran to the small window next to the main door and peered through.

“Jupe,” he whispered. “The black van is here. Maybe Pete is in there!”

Jupiter hurried to his friend. The black van had stopped in the middle of the forecourt. The driver’s door opened and the man who called himself Esprit de Cartuche got out. Now the huge guy with the tattoo also came out. They both looked tense. Together they went to the rear and opened the door.

Jupiter and Bob held their breath...

Pete! His hands were tied behind his back, but his feet were free.

“Pete seems to be okay,” Bob said with relief, “but what are those guys doing here?”

“The same as us. They want to find out the truth,” Jupiter said, “and since Pete seems to be the only witness, they are bringing him here to make him talk. I’m afraid, though, that they’ll do something to him if he can’t help them with their cause.”

“We have to free him somehow.”

“Watch out, Tattoo’s coming!” Jupiter retreated.

Shortly afterwards, they heard the man banging on the door and trying to open it, but the solid wood was not so easy to break in. Tattoo realized that too. After a moment of silence, he suddenly fiddled around with a lock pick in the keyhole.

The two friends held their breath. They still had no plan. Jupiter looked at the door more closely. It had several locks. No doubt, even without surveillance cameras, the house was very well secured—except for the window in the bedroom.

“The ladder,” muttered the First Investigator.

“Should we pull it in?” asked Bob. “—Else they will see it eventually.”

Jupiter thought quickly. “We’ll leave the ladder where it is. Anyway, we won’t be able to get it up without attracting attention.”

“But when they see the ladder, they’ll know someone is in here,” Bob said, “and they’ll realize it’s not the police.”

They heard Tattoo swear. Suddenly there was a clearly audible click. Apparently he had picked one of the locks. Tattoo shook the door, but it did not open.

“Luckily there are more than one lock,” Jupe said with relief. He stepped up to the window and took a quick look outside. What he saw made his heart rejoice.

Esprit’s attention was completely fixed on Tattoo. Pete, on the other hand, stood a few steps away and had his head turned. From where Pete was standing, he had to see Bob’s Beetle!

However at that moment, Esprit turned to Pete. He became suspicious, stepped towards the Second Investigator... and also saw the Beetle!

Immediately Jupiter retreated from the window and pulled Bob towards the bedroom. “Esprit has seen your car! If he saw it at the salvage yard yesterday afternoon, he’ll figure out that it’s ours. He’ll look for another entrance and would find the ladder. It’s all the more reason for him to suspect we know something about Forster’s disappearance.”

“—Which doesn’t make our situation any easier,” Bob added.

“They will climb in to get us, but to do so, they have to free Pete’s hands. Our advantage is that Esprit is arrogant. He is convinced that he could make us talk.”

“I see,” said Bob. “How about we push the ladder away when Esprit is climbing up? That way we’ll get rid of him!”

“No, what happens to Pete then? He’ll be on the ladder with them. We have to proceed differently. There is a key inside the bedroom door. We’ll take it. When Pete gets in here, we’ll pull him into the hallway, lock the door, and then call the police! Come on!”

There was no time for long deliberations. Jupiter ran into the bedroom and took the key. Then he inspected the room. There was the green cloth curtain beside the window, but it was not wide enough to hide behind.

Bob looked unobtrusively out of the window. “In what order will they climb up?”

“Good point!” said Jupiter. “They won’t be so stupid as to let Pete go first, otherwise he’ll be up here tipping the ladder over. On the other hand, Esprit will want to be in control of everything. So he will be the last to climb. So I expect the order to be Tattoo-Pete-Esprit.”

“Then we have to overpower Tattoo while Pete climbs in here. Then we’ll decide what to do with Esprit.”

Jupiter nodded and pointed to the wide room divider. “The screen!”

“That’s where we’re supposed to hide? It’s the first place Tattoo will suspect us to be.”

“Exactly.” Jupiter hurriedly pushed the screen to the side between the bed and the window. He pulled the pillow and blanket off the bed and crumpled both up on the bed so that it looked like a crouching body. Then he switched on the bedside lamp. Now the outline of the faked body was blurred on the surface of the screen divider, somewhat giving the impression that the two boys were hiding behind it.

“Wow,” Bob said, “I see.” He peeked outside the window. “They’re coming!”

Jupiter scurried to the other side of the window and stood behind the curtain. With a nod, he told Bob to squat down at the side of the wardrobe, which only hid him partially. He hoped that the screen would immediately attract Tattoo’s attention. At that very second, they had to overpower the man.

From outside, the voices of Esprit and Tattoo came through the window. The next moment, someone could be heard climbing up the ladder.

## 15. The Hidden Door

Jupiter and Bob held their breath. They heard a person climbing up, and with each step, the ladder scraped squeakily against the window frame. Soon, they heard a groan. As they had suspected, it was Tattoo climbing up first.

Now the burly man paused. "I don't believe it," he muttered. He was obviously right outside the window.

"Is the coast clear?" Esprit called from below.

"In a minute, in a minute." Groaning, Tattoo climbed through the window into the room. Apparently he had seen the screen.

Jupiter and Bob tensed their muscles. Now they had to attack at the precise moment!

Suddenly, Jupiter's phone rang—loud and clear—as he had set it earlier so as not to miss the return call from Pete's father.

Tattoo turned around and at the same moment the First Investigator jumped up.

Tattoo had a gun, which he was about to point at Jupiter, but Bob came from behind and courageously used the vase he had been holding to knock the gun out of the man's hand. At that moment, Pete reached the window from outside.

"Stay where you are," Esprit yelled from below, but the Second Investigator, seeing that his two friends were overpowering Tattoo, threw himself into the fray.

Bob dodged Pete and stumbled, but in his fall he still managed to kick the gun far under the bed with his foot.

"Get out of this room, Pete!" Bob shouted, while Jupiter tried to free himself from Tattoo's grasp.

To free Jupe, Pete got hold of the thug's right hand and turned it over. However, Tattoo was strong and now tried to grab Pete in reverse. Jupe used the moment to crawl free. He got to his feet again and followed Bob, who had run into the hallway. Pete also shook himself loose and ran out of the room.

Immediately, the Second Investigator slammed the door behind him. The last thing he saw of the scene was—like a picture in the window frame—the angry face of Esprit, who was just raising his hand to throw a dagger at Pete.

Then Bob turned the key.

Behind the door, shouting started. After Tattoo had got back on his feet, Esprit roared another message for The Three Investigators. "I'll nail you to the wall, you toads! One by one!" There was nothing left of his fake French charm. Angrily, he banged on the bedroom door.

Breathing heavily, Jupiter pulled out his phone. The caller from just now had given up. It had been Pete's father, but a conversation with him would have to wait. Instead, Jupiter dialled Officer James's number.

After the third ring, someone picked up. "Officer James."

"What luck!" In quick words, Jupiter explained the situation they were in.

"We'll be there! Fifteen minutes!"

Fifteen minutes? That could be too long because the bedroom door would not be able to resist the two thugs much longer.

While Pete stared transfixed at the door to the bedroom, Bob went through the escape routes in his head. The main door was not an option as they did not have the keys; the kitchen and bathroom doors were not lockable, and the windows there had bars. So they were left with the living room where the door to the hallway had a lock which was as solid as that of the bedroom. If necessary, they could get out to the viewing platform, but then that was the end of it.

Meanwhile, Jupiter tried to reach Inspector Cotta. It would take him longer to get here, but it was better safe than sorry. However, only his voicemail answered. Jupiter still left a message telling the inspector where they were and asking him to come as well.

It was quiet in the bedroom now—suspiciously quiet. Then suddenly the door broke off its hinges, at least a little. Wood splintered and a leg of the bedside table appeared through the resulting hole.

“Get into the living room!” Bob yelled. Pete was the last one in and he slammed the door behind them and Bob locked it.

“This is going to be a very long fifteen minutes,” Bob said.

“The wood of this door is more stable,” Jupiter said and knocked on it.

“I hope so,” Pete murmured.

At the same moment, a loud burst sounded, then footsteps could be heard in the hallway. This was followed by thunderous knocks against the living room door—from the sound of it, with the flat of the hand. Apparently the bedside table had been destroyed and the pursuers had to look for new tools.

Jupiter had meanwhile run to the mirror. “The hidden door is our only chance,” he said and began frantically scanning the frame for a mechanism. “Come here! Help me!”

“What if Lauderdale is in there?” asked Bob.

“I’d rather have him than those crazy two out there!” Jupe replied.

While Jupe and Bob frantically inspected the mirror, Pete had to understand the situation first. Was there a hidden door here? Had Paul Forster perhaps disappeared into it during his visit? But Pete had seen him fall off the railing! And who was Lauderdale?

The Second Investigator heard the pursuers poking around in the door lock. He knew the sound of a lock pick only too well. He also had his own lock pick set with him, hidden in a secret compartment in the inside of his jeans. He took out a lock pick and pushed it into the keyhole from his side to obstruct the thug’s attempt. Maybe that would buy them the time they needed until the police arrived. However, a cracking sound made it clear to him that the two thugs were now resorting to more tangible means.

“I can’t find anything,” cried Jupiter, who had also been struck by the noise.

Bob too, had finished examining his side of the mirror. As he straightened up, his eyes fell on a small picture hanging on the wall a little way from the mirror. It featured a painted sunset, and was rather kitschy.

Bob stepped closer and unhooked the small painting. Nothing happened. He tried to put the painting back on, which proved to be not so easy. It had to be fitted exactly into the L-shaped hook protruding from the wall. This gave Bob a thought. When the picture was hung back, he turned the picture clockwise. It felt like winding a clockwork mechanism. Bob continued to turn. Then something clicked, and with a jerk, the mirror flipped open.

Startled, Jupiter backed away. He pulled the mirror open wider like a door, and now stared at a dark opening.

Pete turned around. Indeed, there was a hidden door! Again the pursuers banged furiously on the living room door. It would not hold for much longer, and the Second

Investigator did not want to fall into the hands of the crazy Frenchman and Tattoo a second time.

Jupiter seemed to think similarly and waved to his friend. "In you go! You're the one they want."

Pete didn't have to be asked twice. He ran to Jupiter and then stepped through the hidden door. Carefully, he felt the wall in front of him. Even though light was shining in, he couldn't see much because everything was completely dark. The surface seemed to be made of metal. Pete's right hand grasped a handle that suddenly gave way. Before the Second Investigator realized what it was for, the floor opened beneath him. So it was a trap door!

Pete was still aware of the hidden door slamming shut behind him when he fell into what might be a bottomless pit!

## 16. Cornered by Esprit

Pete was almost in free fall. Panic shot up inside him. Where would the shaft lead to? And would he survive the fall? A thought flashed through his mind—if Forster had installed an escape route here, it had to end somewhere.

Suddenly the Second Investigator felt resistance against his back. He was racing madly along something cool. Then the slope abruptly flattened out, and suddenly Pete felt like he was in one of those tube-like fun slides they had in water theme parks—one in which it was pitch dark throughout such that you would not know what was coming next.

Pete skidded into a bend and the speed decreased. Now he was gliding along more slowly. It seemed as if he could survive everything without any major injuries.

What about Jupe and Bob? The hidden door had closed behind him without the two of them entering the shaft. They had to still be in the living room—possibly now in the hands of the two men.

The slope of the track became flatter and flatter. Pete's sports shoes squeaked on the surface and finally the Second Investigator came to a stop.

When the throbbing in his ears subsided, he heard the sea. It seemed to be very close, and in the dark, a deep green patch dawned. Was there also a slight breeze?

Pete swung his legs out of the track and found ground under his feet. He listened again. There was no sign of Jupiter and Bob. Pete dismissed the idea of climbing up the tube to look for them in case they were sliding down towards him—and that would cause a life-threatening collision. In any case, the shaft was too steep and slippery for that.

Pete felt his way towards the green glow. A gentle breeze came towards him—moist, salty sea air. The glow grew stronger until Pete finally got hold of something with his hand. It felt cool and sticky. Pete realized that they were wet plastic slats hanging down from above.

Carefully, he pushed the slats aside as if opening a curtain. In front, everything was green again—only now they were plants growing down from above. Behind them, the water rushed. Now and then salty drops of water splashed through the leaves.

In front of the exit was a step carved into the rock. Pete climbed through the opening and let the slats slide back into position behind him. He peered through the plants. Indeed, he was deep down on the coast of the open sea and had to be some distance away from Forster's rocky cove.

On the left was a narrow path. Pete went on it. For a few metres, the overhanging plants still gave him privacy, then he had to leave the area. Now the path led along a slope towards the sea.

Pete hurried as best as he could on the damp ground. Maybe he could find his way back to the house and help his friends. However, the path seemed to go in the opposite direction.

Pete reached a small ravine that led inland. Gradually, the path got lost among the undergrowth and rocks. He tried to make his way as best as he could to Forster's house when he suddenly spotted another house. It was on the right, a little above him and it was nowhere near as posh as Forster's house.

Pete ducked his head. In front of the house was a wooden patio and a man was standing there. He was looking through binoculars in the direction where Forster's pompous house

must be, but he had obviously not noticed Pete.

Pete thought he could get help here, but something made him hesitate. Why was the man watching Forster's house? The Three Investigators had not had time to exchange information. Possibly Jupiter and Bob already knew the man.

"Anything to see, Lauderdale?" a voice now called from the background.

The man pulled down the sunglasses he had pushed on his head because of the binoculars and turned around. "Only the viewing platform, and no one's there now. Maybe we'll go over there after all, to see what the boys are doing. Besides, I'm curious what they know." Now the man disappeared from Pete's sight.

So the man was Lauderdale. Jupiter had earlier mentioned the name, but in no clear context. Pete had no idea whether the man was dangerous, and why would he want to know what Bob and Jupiter were doing? Surely that's who he meant by 'the boys'. So this had to be connected with Forster's disappearance, but what did these men have to do with it?

Pete worked his way through the rough terrain towards the house. Peering over the edge of the patio from below, he saw the man and his companion just leaving the house. Pete followed them at a distance.

In Forster's living room, Bob desperately turned the small painting again while Jupiter pulled at the mirror frame. However nothing happened. The hidden door remained closed.

Bob took a quick look at the living room door, which already had holes the size of a hand. "Why won't the hidden door open?" he whispered angrily.

Finally, Jupiter let go of the frame. It was useless. "I suspect it's a security design," he said. "When you're inside, some mechanism is activated that locks the hidden door so that any pursuers would have a harder time opening it. You probably have to reset it for it to work another time."

At that moment, the door burst open. Tattoo entered the living room with his gun in his hand.

Esprit followed him like a shadow. In his hand he held his pointed dagger. As his eyes roamed around the room, his gaze narrowed. "Where is he?" he asked quietly.

"Pete? I don't know. He did not follow us in here," Jupiter lied in a cold voice. "Wasn't he in the kitchen?"

"Arrgh!" In a sudden burst of anger, Esprit flung the dagger towards Jupiter. It whizzed past the First Investigator by a hair's breadth and lodged in the wall vibrating. "You've got to be kidding me, you cheeky fat boy!"

So the men had not directly seen them storm into the living room. Jupiter remained quite calm. "Look around you! Where is Pete supposed to be?"

Esprit turned to Tattoo. "Search the kitchen and the bathroom... and the cupboard in the hallway."

Tattoo waved his gun and left the room.

"Did you make Forster disappear as well as Pete now?" asked Esprit.

"We have nothing to do with any disappearance," Jupe replied.

"Surely your friend didn't vanish on his own!"

Tattoo came back, shrugging his shoulders.

"The viewing platform!" hissed Esprit.

Tattoo went outside, even though it was obvious no one was there.

"Why are you looking for Forster anyway?" asked Jupe.

"—Because my boss wants to get him."

“Then you are just employees?”

Esprit looked at Jupiter grimly. “We are not here for a conversation, *mon ami*. I tell you, when I finish this job, I’m going back to France and start a new life! Oh, how I hate you nosy, ill-bred Californian boys!” He noticed Jupiter squinting at the dagger stuck in the wall. “Don’t you dare touch that!” He pulled out a second dagger. “My throw is *très vite!*”

Tattoo came back from the platform. “Nothing,” he announced.

Esprit reached into his jacket and pulled out his mobile phone. Apparently he had received a text message. “*Alors*,” he commented as he read it, and then turned to Tattoo. “Things are getting out of hand. We should get this done once and for all. You have other things going on in life, don’t you?”

“You mean when we get through this?”

Esprit nodded gruffly.

“Not really.”

Esprit laughed. Then he turned to Jupiter and Bob. His voice sounded low and dangerous. “I need to know where Forster is—now! I don’t have much time left!”

“Unfortunately, this is a very complex question with many possibilities...” Jupiter began.

“Thin ice,” Esprit intervened immediately, “very thin ice, *mon ami!* If you don’t get straight to the point, then—”

Esprit was interrupted. A policeman stepped into the room with his gun raised. “Put all weapons on the floor and hands up!”

## 17. Tony Summer

Relieved, Jupiter and Bob looked at the policeman. He had to be Officer James!

As ordered, Tattoo put his gun on the floor and raised his hands. Esprit also put his hands up.

“Careful, he has a dagger,” Bob warned the policeman.

“*Canaille!*” Esprit hissed.

The officer patted the crooks down for more weapons and seized several daggers from Esprit. Then he handcuffed the two men.

“Did you come alone, Officer... James?” asked Jupiter.

The policeman nodded. “The cavalry is coming soon... and yes, I’m Officer James. You are presumably Jupiter and Bob?”

The two nodded.

“And where is Pete?”

“I’d like to know that too!” cried Esprit. “He got away from us. Officer, you’ve arrested the wrong people! You’d better ask what these boys have to do with Paul Forster.”

“Is that right?” asked James. “Pete is not here?”

Nobody said anything.

“I need to get a straight answer!” Officer James demanded. “After all, he’s still under investigation.”

“We don’t know, officer,” Jupiter said, which was true. “We hope Pete is safe.”

Officer James took a deep breath. “All right,” he said, pointing to the sofa. “Let’s sit down first. I want to know what happened here.”

While they were taking their seats, Jupiter’s phone rang.

“Is it Pete?” asked James.

Jupiter looked at the display. “No... his father.”

“Okay,” James said. “Answer it.”

“Mr Crenshaw? Jupiter here. Yes, I had called... Exactly, that’s what I wanted to know... What’s his name? ... Interesting, the last name again please... So it was just a visit... A colleague who... Aha! ... Ah, I see... hardly any girls... Yes, thank you, Mr Crenshaw! You’ve been very helpful... Pete? Well, he’s not with me... Yes, later then, bye!”

“What were you talking about?” asked Esprit.

Officer James also looked at Jupiter curiously.

The First Investigator ignored the question. “Please believe us, Officer James. All three of us have nothing to do with Forster’s disappearance. We are looking for explanations and —” Jupe could not finish the sentence.

Another man entered the room. “What is this all about?” he asked, looking at the destroyed door.

Officer James tilted his head. “Mr Lauderdale! What are you doing here? I told you this morning that you are not allowed in here!”

“Excuse me. I saw someone on the viewing platform from my place,” Lauderdale said quietly. “I understand that the house is locked so I came to check on things and found the door opened...” His gaze went around the room.

“Well, maybe you can really help us,” Officer James said. “One of the boys is missing—Pete.”

“Pete?”

“Yes—the witness of the fall.”

“What happened?”

James groaned. “We don’t know! Forster is gone, Pete is gone, no one knows where they are, and supposedly no one has anything to do with it...”

“At least I can provide an answer.” Yet another man entered the living room.

“Inspector Cotta!” Jupiter exclaimed in delight. “You got my message?”

“Yes, I was on my way here anyway... and guess who I just met outside here? Please come in, gentlemen, come in!”

A man entered whom Jupiter had never seen before, and behind him was... Pete!

The Second Investigator winked at his friends and joined them. Bob nudged him in the side with relief.

Meanwhile, Officer James succinctly informed Cotta of what he knew. “And who is this man?” he asked finally, pointing to the newcomer.

He coughed artificially. “My name is Tony Summer—a friend of Mr Forster’s, and an acquaintance of Mr Lauderdale.”

“Nice to meet you in person,” Jupiter took the floor. “I’ve heard about you. I understand that you assisted Paul Forster with client consultations.”

“That’s how it was. Whenever there were special safety issues or... unusual construction requirements.”

“—Such as... escape routes?”

Summer winced briefly. Lauderdale also seemed to have shown some emotion.

“You could say that, yes,” Summer said meekly.

Officer James cleared his throat audibly. “Just for your information, I’m in charge of the investigation here!”

Inspector Cotta laughed. “James, you’ll have to get used to Jupiter Jones... but trust me—in the end, those responsible will be behind bars, and it’s our job to take care of it.”

Jupiter was not deterred. “You also built such an escape route here in Mr Forster’s house—right, Mr Summer?”

“Now it’s getting interesting!” Esprit interjected.

“—Because his death was staged,” Jupiter announced. “The world was supposed to think he fell into the sea and drowned.”

“So it’s true after all!” exclaimed Esprit. “And Pete helped him do it!”

“No,” Jupiter said firmly. “That’s what the police believed, just like you did. That’s why you visited us at the salvage yard, to find out more about us, but Pete’s role was different. He was supposed to witness the cliff fall. He’s a blameless boy who is on the side of justice because he is an investigator, namely a member of The Three Investigators.”

“—But the police did not believe me,” Pete said. “I was suspected of murder!”

“Well, it didn’t go off without a hitch,” Jupiter said, “but I think Forster and Summer were counting on it that you were just only the witness and not the one who pushed Forster into the sea. Besides, you were only Plan B. Obviously, it hadn’t worked out perfectly, but they were forced to act quickly.”

“Excuse me! I was only Plan B?” asked Pete. “What are you talking about? How did that Forster guy know I am an investigator? Do I perhaps have a sign hanging around my neck?”

Jupiter looked at Pete soothingly. “I understand your frustration, Pete—”

“—And how do you explain what I saw? I saw the cliff fall myself!”

“You did, but you were deceived. It took an expert in special effects to do that,” Jupiter said, turning to Forster’s colleague. “—Especially someone with a lot of experience, and you have that, don’t you, Mr Tony Summer? I believe that’s not your real name. Your real name is Anthony Spring—‘Tony’ instead of ‘Anthony’ and ‘Summer’ instead of ‘Spring’. It was a nice idea for an alias.”

“Anthony Spring?” Something clicked in Pete’s mind. “You were a colleague of my father’s, weren’t you? Special effects—in a couple of movie projects in Hollywood! I never met you personally, but...” He looked at the man, but he didn’t react.

“When computer animation entered the movie business and good old special effects were no longer in demand, Anthony Spring didn’t go along with the change, unlike your father, Pete,” Jupiter continued. “He just told me all this on the phone. You, Mr Spring, changed professions and earned your money elsewhere, in particular, by doing special jobs for private individuals.”

“—And he has a daughter!” At last Pete finally remembered. “She was once at my birthday party a long time ago. Now I realize a few things. What was her name? No, it is not Xenia. That’s just the name she gave me... It was Fiona! Isn’t that right, Mr Spring? She was the one who brought me here! I didn’t recognize her at first.”

“We tested that out at the surf beach,” Spring explained. “She’s sorry! We don’t usually get involved in dodgy stories, but I asked her to do it for me urgently, because an earlier plan to make Forster disappear didn’t work.”

“Plan A was Mark Gonnese, a musician,” Jupe explained. “Unfortunately he didn’t do you the favour of opening the door to this room and witnessing the fall. He simply went home without having achieved anything.”

Esprit, like everyone else, had been listening very intently the whole time. “All these background stories don’t interest me. Where is Forster? And what happened on the viewing platform?” he asked. “Now, out with it!”

“With pleasure...” Jupiter said and looked meaningfully around. He loved this situation that everyone was hanging on his every word—Inspector Cotta, Officer James, Esprit, and the others.

“Forster’s death was faked,” he began. “Instead of him... a doll was used for the fall!”

“How do you know that for sure?” asked Cotta.

“Mr Forster was presumably on the phone with the police on the viewing platform, calling for help, when Pete was waiting in the hallway. But there you can’t hear the shouts from the platform at all, especially when it’s windy and the sea is roaring. Bob and I tried it out. The shouts could easily be from a recording played through a PA system, but that is not important. So Forster must have gone into hiding and let the doll take his place.”

“But how could the doll have fallen into the sea by itself?” asked Pete. “There was no other person on the viewing platform.”

“My guess is a very thin cord,” said Jupiter. “The doll was pulled over the railing and down into the sea. I did an experiment on that. If it had simply fallen straight down, the doll would have hit a rock in the cove below... but it didn’t, as you reported. So there must have been a jerk towards the sea.”

“And how was the pull triggered?” asked Pete.

“I suspect that Mr Spring was watching the scene via hidden camera and then took action.”

Anthony Spring nodded slowly. In a tone as if he were recounting an unpleasant holiday incident, he then began to speak: “That’s how it was... I can’t deny it. My compliments to you for figuring that out. When my daughter and Pete left the beach, Fiona dialled Paul on

Pete's phone for a few seconds as a sign that everything was going according to plan. I took up position on a boat a short distance away from the cove. The spot is difficult to see from the house because of the rocks. There is a winch on the boat. Before that, on a windless day, I had installed a metal hook at the seabed below Forster's platform. A thin cord ran from the body of the doll at the railing through this hook to my winch. This allowed me to bring the doll down as realistically as possible and then haul it onto the boat. I had the view inside the house on my phone and I pulled the doll down at the precise moment."

Jupiter nodded with satisfaction.

"Under the surface of the sea, I pulled the doll towards me," Spring continued. "I picked it up, packed everything in a fishing net and steered away in my boat. By the time the police search helicopter took off, I was long ashore." Spring said the last sentence not without a certain pride.

"A great special effect performance indeed," Jupiter said, and the praise was meant quite seriously. "It was worthy for a movie. Inspector Cotta, is such an action actually a crime?"

"Faking a death is indeed considered a crime, and this was aiding and abetting it," Cotta said. "But why the huge effort? Just because Forster's former girlfriend wanted to take revenge on him?"

"I am almost certain that is not the reason," Jupiter said. "Rather, it seems to me that there is a great deal of money involved if Monsieur de Cartuche here was planning to use his bounty for finding Paul Forster to go back to France and start a new life." As he said this, Jupiter watched Esprit closely. The Frenchman's expression had looked surprised at Cotta's question, but then showed uncertainty at Jupiter's statement. The First Investigator was on the right track.

Officer James rose. "We should work out the details at the police department."

"Did you check on the former girlfriend, James?" Cotta asked.

"We are still in the process. It's not easy."

"Is there any indication that the lady speaks Spanish?" Pete suddenly asked.

"Forster's ex-girlfriend? I don't know," James said.

Jupiter didn't know what Pete was alluding to, but immediately turned to Mr Lauderdale. "What do you know about this, Mr Lauderdale?"

The neighbour jumped up. "Spanish? No, I don't think so," he said. "At least Paul never mentioned anything about it."

"Inspector, can you get Esprit's mobile phone?" Pete interjected. "It's in the inside pocket of his jacket."

Cotta walked up to Esprit. "May I?"

"Hold on, Cotta," James interrupted. "This is my case!"

However, Cotta had already taken the phone. "Your fingerprint, please."

"No!" Esprit objected.

"I can also use one of your many fingerprints and make a copy of it with adhesive film, but then you will certainly not be seen as co-operative."

"All right..." Esprit mumbled and unlocked the mobile phone.

Pete stepped up to the inspector. "Less than two hours ago, he received a call from his employer who apparently spoke Spanish."

Jupiter took a look at the country code of the calling number. "It was a call from Bolivia," he said. "Doesn't the ex-girlfriend live on the east coast of the US?"

"Then she must have travelled around a bit," Esprit said and then laughed bitterly. "Where the woman is is not important at all. The crucial question is where is Forster."

"I don't see how you can still benefit from this information," Jupiter said, "especially when you will be prosecuted for abduction. Mr Forster has in all probability used the escape route leading out of the house. He would be long gone by now with a day's head start on us."

"I would like to take the two abductors to my police car now," Officer James decided.

Cotta cast a questioning look at him, but nodded. "Everyone come outside with me," he ordered.

As they walked onto the forecourt, Jupiter turned to the inspector at an appropriate moment. "There is one thing I wanted to ask you, Inspector. Why did you describe me as a 'cheeky fat boy' to Officer James? How should I put it... I don't like it when you talk about me like that..."

"Me?" Inspector Cotta laughed out loud. "I would never do that, Jupiter, even if I might have thought of it at some time! I haven't said anything about your appearance or your characteristics!"

"But... Pete told me that after Officer James called you—" Jupiter suddenly fell silent as something was working inside him. Where had Officer James got that description from then? At the time when Pete was first interrogated, how had he known how Jupiter looked like when they had never met before... Suddenly Jupe recalled that someone else had called him in exactly the same way...

Esprit de Cartuche! ... This happened just after he flung the dagger towards Jupiter in Forster's living room!

Had Officer James and the Frenchman been in contact previously? That had to be it! That was how Esprit and Tattoo had known Jupiter's name when they first appeared in the salvage yard! In the first place, how did the two thugs know Jupiter was at the salvage yard, if not from James? After Jupiter had spoken to the officer the first time by phone, Esprit and Tattoo had turned up at the salvage yard a while later.

Jupiter grabbed the inspector by the arm. "Inspector Cotta, I don't think you can rely on Officer James. He may be on the take and working with the criminals. He might even let them go!"

"Jupiter! That's a pretty serious accusation."

"I know, but—"

The Inspector looked intensely at the First Investigator. "In fact, Detective Ella has told me something about it as well."

"About what?"

"She was suspicious and had apparently been on the trail of Officer James for some time."

When they were on the forecourt, the inspector asked James to wait a moment because he had to make a phone call. Jupe guessed that Cotta wanted to talk to Detective Ella privately.

A while later, the inspector came back and walked straight towards Officer James.

"Officer James!" Inspector Cotta called out.

"What?"

"You are under arrest!"

"Under arrest?" asked James indignantly. "What for?"

Without hesitation, Cotta pulled James's hands together behind his back and handcuffed him. "Suspicion of corruption in the service," Cotta replied. "You passed on information to these two crooks here."

"What are you talking about?" roared James, tugging at the handcuffs. "Release me at once!"

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” said Cotta. “There are too many bad guys and too few police officers.” Again he took out his phone, this time to call for assistance.

## 18. Where is Paul Forster?

Officer James continued to protest—but to deaf ears.

Esprit laughed bitterly. “James, you are not worth our money! Even if I go to prison for a while, there’s still a chance I’ll get my *argent de poche* later... and that is if I learn the truth and find Forster! I do my job at least that way.”

“Then come clean, Esprit!” said Jupiter. “I suppose you can now confirm that Forster is not running from his ex-girlfriend. He just made that up. Probably she doesn’t even exist!”

Esprit smiled.

Jupiter went all out. “My guess is narcotics. Forster was working with the Bolivian National Police. I happened to find an embroidered badge in his bedroom. It is inscribed with the acronym ‘FELCN’ which stands for ‘*Fuerza Especial de Lucha Contra el Narcotráfico*’. That’s the name of the Special Anti-Narcotics Force in Bolivia.”

“I am impressed, *mon chèr!*” Esprit nodded. “*Et oui...* in fact, the Bolivian drug mafia is on Forster’s tail because he stole a lot of money from them. It was a long time ago.

“The son of a drug lord was abducted by another gang. *Alors*, Forster was working as an agent for the anti-narcotic police at the time. One day, in the middle of the jungle, a fortune fell out of the sky—a suitcase full of money! *Pluie d’or*. It was the ransom for the boy. The drug lord had thrown it down a bridge from a train in a lonely mountain area as agreed. However, the courier of the abductor had got stuck somewhere in the mud in his car. Instead, Forster happened to be there. He took the money and kept it. Then he went into hiding, and made the police believe that he had perished in the mountains. Instead, he took off with the money. He knew from his job how to get IDs and what was needed to escape. After all, he had been chasing people like that for years. *C’est toute l’histoire.*”

“What happened to the drug lord?” Jupiter asked.

“She had to pay for her son a second time,” Esprit continued. “However, she knew who had the first ransom payment, and she has been after Forster ever since because a lot of money was at stake. Above all, she can’t let something like that pass, and she has staying power. For years, she had no leads. Then came the tip-off that Forster had absconded to the US. Bit by bit, the lady had her contacts scour the area for people who had moved here at some point and had conspicuously more money than normal. She eventually narrowed it down to Oxnard.”

“Conversely, Forster also got hints that someone was asking about him,” Jupiter suspected, “and immediately set his well-conceived escape plans in motion.”

“Under these circumstances, however, your involvement looks different again,” Cotta said to Anthony Spring. “It’s also about the cover-up of a money theft.”

Spring had turned pale. “I didn’t know about that!” he cried in exasperation, casting a strange look at Lauderdale. “Forster always said his ex-girlfriend was after him, didn’t he?”

“Unfortunately, it was only to deceive us,” Lauderdale immediately added, “and to get us involved. Yes, Inspector, Anthony is right. Our so-called friend fed us this other story to get us on his side. He used us—as with other people who should warn him if anyone asks about him.”

"So that's what happened, because suddenly he urged us to implement his long prepared escape plan," Spring said. He had regained his composure.

Lauderdale shook his head disapprovingly. "I was still trying to persuade him to talk to the woman and sort everything out calmly, but I ran into a brick wall. Now I know why!" He took a breath. "I thought he was my friend..."

"—But Forster must have told you where he was going?" asked Cotta.

Lauderdale looked indecisive. "He always made a big secret of that. So much for trust! He often said that he would get in touch, but... I overheard that he was very interested in a certain area in Mexico—Yucatan, I believe..."

"I'll take care of it," Cotta promised and looked around. He was beginning to need a good coffee. "Then we part ways," he said, shaking Lauderdale's hand. "—For now, at least. You're not quite out of this yet, as we still need to question you."

Lauderdale smiled a little nervously and grabbed his right earlobe with his left hand. Then he turned and made his way through the bushes towards his house.

"Detective Ella is coming with reinforcements," Inspector told the rest of them. "I'd appreciate it if you could stay until she arrives."

At that moment, Bob noticed that Pete was looking very confused as if something was bothering him. "Pete, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Stop!" Pete suddenly shouted. Everyone stared at the Second Investigator.

"He's Forster! Lauderdale is Forster! They're both one and the same person! I'm going after him!" Pete started sprinting to the bushes where Lauderdale had disappeared to.

The rest froze for a moment. What Pete had said was too surprising. Then Jupiter and Bob ran off after Pete.

"Wait, Pete!" Bob shouted.

"No time to explain," Pete shouted back. "Help me look for Lauderdale first. I'll explain later."

Jupe and Bob combed through the bushes, criss-crossing, up to Lauderdale's house and back again. Lauderdale could not be found.

"Now he's slipped through our fingers!" Jupiter panted, completely out of breath, as he came next to Bob. "Where has Pete gone to?"

"I don't know," Bob replied. "We might as well go back to Cotta and wait for him."

Meanwhile, Pete had already reached the junction to Forster's house. At that very moment, he saw two police cars approaching. He waved his hands frantically to stop the first car. The side window lowered and it was Detective Ella.

"Detective Ella!" Pete called out and quickly explained the situation to her.

Ella asked Pete to get into the police car, and she directed the second police car to go search for Lauderdale. The two cars immediately went off in different directions.

A while later, Bob and Jupiter arrived back on the forecourt of Forster's house.

"Where's Pete?" Cotta asked.

"We lost him," Bob replied.

"What made him think that Lauderdale is Forster?" Cotta continued.

"He didn't have time to explain," Bob said. "We'll have to wait till he comes back."

At that moment, a police car drove up. Detective Ella lowered the side window. In the passenger seat was Pete, but the eyes of the rest fell mainly on the man with the thick dark glasses who was sitting in the back seat and staring in another direction.

"Where did you find Lauderdale?" Inspector Cotta asked Ella.

“He ran in front of my car in a panic, and based on what Pete had told me, I detained him.”

Inspector Cotta opened the rear car door. “Well, Mr Lauderdale or Forster, or whatever your name is, can you please explain yourself?”

The man turned his face to the inspector. “Yes, I’m Paul Forster,” he admitted, “and Ken Lauderdale at the same time. You must understand... I wanted to stay here—here in Devil’s Cliff. This is my life. It has become my new home. I didn’t want to flee to other countries again. It’s so much more exhausting than I had imagined... so I built a parallel identity just in case.”

“Pete, how did you figure out that Lauderdale is Forster?” Jupe asked.

“The gesture!” the Second Investigator said. “When he was about to leave just now, he used his left hand to pinch his right earlobe. Forster did that same gesture in the hallway yesterday. Perhaps it was a habit when he is tense. Forster has changed his appearance very cleverly, but that gesture gave him away.”

“What about the photo?” Bob recalled. “There are both of them in it, aren’t there?”

“Faked to assure the world that they are two people,” Jupiter explained. “We won’t find anyone who has ever seen them together... but there’s another piece of evidence—the FELCN badge I mentioned. No one should have found that because it leads to Forster’s true identity. That’s why he entered the house earlier with Mr Spring—I assume via the escape route—and seized the badge.”

“You can climb up the escape route?” asked Pete.

“There are holds in the rock,” Anthony Spring muttered. “I had no idea, I was just helping him. Supposedly he wanted to check a trail.”

“Respect,” said Inspector Cotta, “respect for the almost perfect deception, and it almost even worked. Unfortunately for you and fortunately for justice, The Three Investigators...” he nodded at Jupiter, Pete and Bob, “once again did a really great job!”

“Past cases have been more pleasant,” sighed the Second Investigator.

Forster looked at Pete. “I’m sorry you got into so much trouble,” he said, “but how nice it must be to have such good friends.”